

# AmeriCorps VISTA

## Member Handbook



**AmeriCorps**

[Member Handbook en Español](#)

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# Chapter 1: Background & Purpose

## BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE



AmeriCorps VISTA has a rich history and legacy. The program was first envisioned by President John F. Kennedy when, in 1962, he commissioned a task force to explore the creation of a national service program modeled after the Peace Corps, whose purpose would be to assist Americans afflicted by poverty. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson realized that vision and created what was then known as Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA).

In 1965, the first VISTA members began serving in migrant farm worker camps in California, the hollows of eastern Kentucky, and the urban neighborhoods of Hartford, Connecticut. Since then, more than 220,000 members have served in all 50 states and U.S. Territories. Members serve in tribal, rural, suburban, and urban communities. Poverty exists in many forms, which is why VISTA’s model is driven directly by communities in need. Whether that need is expanding job-training services for out of work coal miners in Kentucky, recruiting disadvantaged youth for computer literacy and coding classes in Minneapolis, or combatting homelessness among our veterans, members help others while gaining valuable skills for their careers.

*“This is your job—to guide the young, to comfort the sick, to encourage the downtrodden, to teach the skills which may lead to a more satisfying and a more rewarding life. On your idealism and on your success rests much of our hope for the final elimination of poverty in our American life.”*

- President Lyndon B Johnson in his remarks to the first VISTA class in 1964.

In 1994, VISTA became a program of AmeriCorps, founded by President Bill Clinton. AmeriCorps is a federal agency that engages millions of Americans in service through national service programs such as AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors and by leading volunteer initiatives for the nation. In 2009 [The Serve](#)

[America Act](#) was signed and expanded the national service programs administered by AmeriCorps.

The purpose of AmeriCorps VISTA, as originally authorized in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act (DVSA) of 1973, as amended, is:

*To strengthen and supplement efforts to eliminate and alleviate poverty ... in the United States by encouraging and enabling persons from all walks of life, all geographic areas, and all age groups, including low-income individuals ... to perform meaningful and constructive volunteer service in agencies, institutions, and situations where the application of human talent and dedication may assist in the solution of poverty and poverty related problems.*

The [Domestic Volunteer Service Act](#) describes three specific objectives of the program to achieve this purpose:

1. To strengthen local agencies and organizations to carry out the purpose of the program
2. To encourage volunteer service at the local level
3. To generate the commitment of private sector resources

The AmeriCorps VISTA program endorses three basic assumptions:

- Private citizens can contribute on a voluntary basis to meet the challenges confronting low-income communities.
- The skills and energies of AmeriCorps members in the VISTA program are used most effectively when the members live and work in the low-income communities they serve.
- The full-time personal involvement of members brings an added dimension to local public and private nonprofit organizations that work to develop lasting solutions to the problems facing low-income communities.

## OVERVIEW OF ROLES



AmeriCorps VISTA achieves its mission by assigning members to sponsoring organizations to build the capacity of those organizations to lift communities out of poverty. Members mobilize community resources, engage individuals in local community service, and increase the capacity of organizations to manage effective anti-poverty programs. It is crucial to the concept of local self-reliance

that sponsoring organizations plan for the eventual phase out of members and for the absorption of their functions by other facets of the organization or community.

Those who designed the VISTA program envisioned that the community members served by AmeriCorps VISTA projects, to the maximum extent practicable, would participate in planning, developing, and implementing programs. In coordination with AmeriCorps Field Offices and sponsoring organizations, the AmeriCorps VISTA program aims to ensure our service partners - sponsors, beneficiaries, and other community contacts - meaningfully participate in our projects.

Over the course of VISTA's more than 50-year legacy, the types of projects and the communities served have varied greatly and will continue to change as the program evolves. The idea of collaborative, grassroots, and sustainable development, however, has not and will not change as this is the heart of AmeriCorps VISTA's anti-poverty mission. Four core principles provide the framework of all AmeriCorps VISTA projects:

### 1. Ending poverty

- The project's goal addresses helping individuals and communities move out of poverty, rather than making poverty more tolerable through short-term services.

### 2. Empowering communities

- The project engages residents of low-income communities in planning, development, and implementation of the project.

### 3. Building capacity

- Members strengthen, expand, and increase the reach of anti-poverty organizations and programs by working on projects with staff and volunteers, rather than directly with people in need.

#### 4. Creating sustainable solutions

- Members build capacity for organizations to address poverty long after the VISTA members are gone. VISTA members develop systems, relationships, and knowledge which they transfer to the organization and the community to sustain over the long-term.

### **ROLE OF SPONSORING ORGANIZATION**

Members serve under the auspices of a sponsoring organization (often referred to as an AmeriCorps VISTA sponsor). A sponsoring organization may be a non-profit organization, educational institution, tribal, or public agency that is committed to creating solutions to problems affecting low-income communities. The organization partners both with the low-income communities it serves and with AmeriCorps VISTA.

The sponsoring organization manages AmeriCorps VISTA resources, including the members and sometimes grant funds, and provides the support necessary to achieve project goals. In some cases, the sponsoring organization shares the cost of members by committing to pay the living allowance of one or more of their members.

Along with the project plan, a sponsoring organization develops a VISTA Assignment Description (VAD), essentially a work plan, for each member. Successfully completing the tasks in the VAD leads to attaining the goals of the project plan. The sponsor reports to AmeriCorps VISTA on the progress made in meeting its goals, in addition to reporting on the impact the members have had serving at its site(s). In support of the member, the sponsor provides supervision, orientation, professional development, and logistical support.

### **ROLE OF COMMUNITY**

The community plays a critical role as both the advisor and beneficiary of the project. Community may be defined geographically (e.g., a neighborhood), demographically (e.g., school children), or by affinity (e.g., individuals seeking food security). Given the diversity of the communities in which members serve, the level of involvement

and role a community plays in planning, developing, and implementing programs is equally diverse.

Community representatives, with varying levels of input, work with a sponsoring organization to develop a project. Community needs, desires, and priorities shape the project's goals and objectives, which determine the members' assignment descriptions.

At a project implementation level, community members directly and indirectly work with members. As partners, colleagues, and neighbors, the member and the community members share and transfer information, skills, attitudes, and behaviors. This exchange is based on a mutual partnership and mutual learning for the transfer to be successful, and it is the basis of sustainable, grassroots community development. Ultimately, all projects aim to have community partners assume responsibility of the project's activities.

## **ROLE OF AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBER**

Members make a full-time, one-year commitment to alleviate poverty in a particular community. Their role in alleviating poverty is to mobilize community resources, increase the capacity of the low-income community to achieve its goals, and to ensure that the activities initiated or expanded are sustained by the community.

## **AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBER ASSIGNMENT**



A member's assignment depends on the needs of the community being served and the issue(s) being addressed by the project to which the member is assigned. The VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) provides an overview of the member's activities and duties as well as a description of how and when to accomplish them.

Members build the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities. The sponsor, in coordination with the AmeriCorps Field Office, works with the community to establish goals and to develop a plan to address identified needs. The member serves as a catalyst and change agent, assisting in creating or expanding the sponsor's programs and mobilizing community resources.

A member assignment does not include the delivery of individual services to clients, that is, "direct service," nor activities more appropriately performed by the sponsoring organization's administrative support staff, except in very limited circumstances. Limited circumstances include situations in which (1) a brief period of direct service is necessary to understand the service elements of the sponsoring organization, (2) direct service is incidental to the time and effort in carrying out the primary responsibilities of the member assignment, or (3) direct service is necessary for training purposes.

Also, in general, a member may not assume, accept, or retain positions of leadership, or become identified with a particular faction or group, or with a partisan or nonpartisan political group in the communities in which he/she serves. The assumption of such positions by a member would hinder the community's ability to develop its own leadership capacity.

## **SUPERVISION**

Each member has a supervisor responsible for managing the project. The member receives direction and guidance from a supervisor who works for the sponsoring organization, rather than the AmeriCorps Field Office or AmeriCorps Headquarters. Members serving with intermediary sponsors may have a site supervisor at their host site organization as well as an overall project supervisor at the sponsoring organization.

A member is not an employee of the sponsoring organization, nor of the host site if serving with an intermediary organization. A member is also not an employee of AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps VISTA, or the federal government, except for very specific purposes (see "Unemployment Compensation" section in Chapter 14) outlined in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973. A member is a federal resource to a local organization.

## **ROLE OF AMERICORPS VISTA LEADER**

AmeriCorps VISTA leaders assist sponsoring organizations and members in achieving program objectives and developing new project activities and sources of community support. Leaders are sometimes assigned to larger projects or to specific regions. As such, not all projects will have leaders.

Leaders are former full-time AmeriCorps members, or Peace Corps volunteers who have demonstrated exemplary skills and leadership in community service.

Leaders are not permitted to perform administrative or supervisory functions for their sponsoring organizations or for AmeriCorps Field Offices. They do not supervise other members. Instead, they provide support and coordination for members to increase the project's impact. In return for fulfilling this role, leaders are eligible to receive a small increase in their living allowance. (See Chapter 10 for further details about the leader program.)

## **ROLE OF THE VISTA MEMBER SUPPORT UNIT**

The VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU) provides a full array of administrative support to candidates, members, and alumni. This support includes assistance with the member application, enrollment forms, training events, active service, end-of-service, and post-service.

For questions about completing forms, or issues pertaining to benefits, including travel reimbursement, living allowance, and end-of-service awards, contact the VMSU for assistance through the National Service Hotline at 800.942.2677 or submit a request online to the VMSU at [https://questions.nationalservice.gov/app/ask\\_eg](https://questions.nationalservice.gov/app/ask_eg).

## **ROLE OF THE AMERICORPS FIELD OFFICE**

AmeriCorps has field staff working throughout the United States. There are AmeriCorps Field Offices located in eight regions representing all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. AmeriCorps Field Office staff provide outreach, program development, technical assistance, and evaluation in support of AmeriCorps' national service network, in addition to member support. Staff assist sponsoring organizations in refining project goals and objectives and in determining if the proposed project aligns with the AmeriCorps VISTA program mission.

AmeriCorps staff approve a sponsoring organization's project plan and member applications, arranges for the candidates to participate in VISTA Member Orientation (VMO) for supervisors to view the VISTA Sponsor Orientation (VSO). After members are assigned to a project, the AmeriCorps Field Office supports the sponsoring organization as they provide training, professional development, and technical assistance to members. Moreover, the field office is a resource for AmeriCorps VISTA policy and procedure. If an issue cannot be resolved between a supervisor and a member, the sponsor should contact the appropriate field office. A list of AmeriCorps field Offices is available here: <https://americorps.gov/contact/region-offices>

AmeriCorps Field Office staff conduct periodic project visits and review Project Progress Reports to monitor the sponsoring organization's use of members toward achieving the project's goals and objectives.

## **ROLE OF AMERICORPS VISTA HEADQUARTERS OFFICE**

AmeriCorps VISTA is headquartered in Washington, DC. This office, in consultation with AmeriCorps Field Offices, determines goals, policy, administrative procedures, and budgetary requirements for effective program operation.

The AmeriCorps VISTA Headquarters Office performs the following tasks:

- Monitors progress toward achieving national program goals and priorities
- Allocates AmeriCorps VISTA resources among the regions
- Ensures AmeriCorps staff and sponsoring organizations adhere to AmeriCorps VISTA policies and procedures
- Researches and shares effective program models
- Develops and implements training, professional development, and technical assistance for members, leaders, and sponsors
- Administers member support services, such as health care, childcare, payments and reimbursements for living allowances and relocation travel, and enrollment for the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or end-of-service stipend
- Oversees national recruitment, marketing, and outreach efforts to attract potential members and provides training and technical assistance to assist sponsors in local recruitment practices.

# **Chapter 2: Overview of Your Year in AmeriCorps VISTA**

## **OVERVIEW OF YOUR YEAR IN AMERICORPS VISTA**

As an AmeriCorps member serving in VISTA, you are expected to attend key events that occur during your year of service and to make certain decisions to maximize your benefits and experience. All members participate in a VISTA Member Orientation, take the oath of service upon entering service, participate in on-going training and

development throughout the year, and, upon successful completion of the year, become members of the AmeriCorps alumni network.

## **BEFORE YOU BEGIN SERVICE**

As a candidate, you are expected to attend to important legal administrative tasks related to your enrollment.

### **CRIMINAL HISTORY CHECK**

AmeriCorps VISTA and its sponsoring organizations strive to maintain a safe and productive environment by assigning members and leaders who do not present a risk to their service partners, particularly vulnerable members of our communities. In addition to comprehensive interviews and personal reference checks, criminal history checks assist sponsors and AmeriCorps VISTA in determining the suitability of applicants.

AmeriCorps VISTA requires a review of the National Sex Offender Public Registry, maintained by the Department of Justice, before an AmeriCorps applicant can be approved for service. Any applicant's records found on this registry will result in deselection.

The AmeriCorps VISTA program will also conduct a comprehensive criminal history check on all candidates. You may be provisionally sworn in as a member or leader until the adjudication process and research is completed. You must submit required information to AmeriCorps VISTA HQ and comply fully with this process or risk termination from service.

Re-enrollees who have undergone a criminal history check and have no lapse in service need not undergo a second check. Reinstated members and leaders who have a lapse in service greater than 120 days are required to undergo another background check. AmeriCorps will provide you with instructions as required.

Potential and current members and leaders are expected to cooperate fully with criminal history checks. Cooperation includes, but is not limited to, fully disclosing past convictions, providing information as required, and responding with truthful and complete information to inquiries made during the criminal history check process. Additionally, if you are arrested during your service term, you are required to report the arrest to your sponsor and AmeriCorps Field Office within three days of the arrest. Failure to cooperate with these requirements, or any attempt to interfere with

implementation of this policy, will result in denial of your application, deselection, or early termination from AmeriCorps service.

## **DRUG SCREENING**

Alcohol abuse and illegal drug use adversely affect health and performance on projects, create potentially dangerous situations, and serve to undermine the community's confidence in AmeriCorps VISTA. Therefore, AmeriCorps VISTA prohibits illegal drug use and alcohol abuse by its leaders and members. Some sponsoring organizations may require leaders and members to pass a drug screening test before or upon arrival or during service at the project site. Failure to submit to drug screening, or a positive test result for illegal drugs, may lead to deselection of the candidate or early termination of the member.

## **AMERICORPS VISTA ADMINISTRATIVE FORMS AND TASKS**

Before VISTA Member Orientation, you must complete various forms and administrative tasks to ensure your benefits are properly administered and that you meet the conditions of service.

Unless otherwise noted, all forms must be completed in [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) and must be completed prior to VISTA Member Orientation.

- **Current Mailing Address.** If you relocate to a new community as part of your service, this address is used to contact you during your year of service (see [Chapter 7](#) for relocation travel information).
- **Email Address.** AmeriCorps VISTA sends members several communications prior to and during the service year. Ensuring your email address is up to date is essential for timely communication.
- **Direct Deposit Form.** As a member, you will have your biweekly living allowance sent to you via electronic funds transfer or direct deposit. The U.S. Treasury requires federal payments to be made by direct deposit, except when this form of payment would cause unusual hardship on the payee. (For hardship cases, see guidance related to paper checks in the Paper Check Payment section of [Chapter 5](#) for the procedure to have payments made by paper check.) Failure to enter your direct deposit information correctly will result in at least a two-week delay in receiving your living allowance.
- **W-4 Employee's Withholding Allowance Form.** Complete the W-4 Form to establish income tax withholding for your year of service.

- **Designation of Beneficiary of Unpaid Compensation Form.** This form ensures that any unpaid compensation (e.g., subsistence allowance, stipend, or travel reimbursement) is paid to your designee[s] in the event of your death during your service.
- **End-of-Service Benefit Election Form.** Members have a choice between one of two end-of-service benefits: either the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or the end-of-service cash stipend. Select either the education award or the cash stipend. (See [Chapter 5](#) for information about the end-of-service stipend and [Chapter 6](#) for details about the education award.) **If you select the end-of-service stipend, you will not be able to switch to the education award.**

## MANDATORY ONLINE COURSEWORK

Prior to attending VISTA Member Orientation (VMO), you must complete certain pre-service online coursework. For details, please see the VISTA Member Orientation learning path in the [VISTA Campus](#).

Having completed this coursework, you will participate in a pre-service training designed to orient you to the AmeriCorps VISTA mission and theory of change, to your project assignment, and to resources that may support you throughout the year.

## YOUR SERVICE YEAR

As a candidate, you attend a VISTA Member Orientation, which provides an overview of your role as a member, the role of your sponsoring organization, and the role of the AmeriCorps Field Office. The orientation is your final step to becoming a member and the starting point to your year of service. The chart below highlights important milestones and timelines occurring during your service year.

Month	Event
Pre-Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates complete all online courses and forms, including electing an end-of-service benefit</li> <li>• Candidates attend an online VISTA Member Orientation (VMO) on the first day of service and complete additional online coursework the first weeks of service</li> <li>• Candidates take the Oath of Service and completes electronic oath form</li> </ul>

1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New members begin service with their project site</li> <li>• Members continue to complete additional online coursework during the first weeks of service as part of VMO</li> <li>• Members receive On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) to introduce them to their sponsoring organization, their community, and their role on the project</li> </ul>
3-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members participate in ongoing member training and development—webinars, online tutorials, and other learning opportunities</li> </ul>
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Last chance to switch from Segal AmeriCorps Education Award to the end-of-service cash stipend</li> <li>• Members complete the Future Plans Form</li> </ul>
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members end service</li> </ul>

## **FIRST WEEK ON YOUR PROJECT**

Your sponsoring organization will provide you with an On-Site Orientation and Training during your first weeks on the project. This orientation will introduce you to your sponsoring organization, the community at large, and your role during your year of service. During the on-site training period, it is important that you review and integrate the VISTA Member Orientation material as appropriate.

## **ONGOING MEMBER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT**

After your service begins, you may participate in ongoing professional development activities to enhance your knowledge and skills in order to effectively carry out your project assignment. The VISTA Campus, an online resource hosted by AmeriCorps VISTA, houses many training opportunities including online tutorials and forums and a series of webinars. You might also attend a workshop, conference, or other professional development opportunity. You should join the member community on the VISTA Campus as well as work with your supervisor to identify training and development opportunities that are available and appropriate. (For more information about training, see [Chapter 4](#).)

## CHANGING YOUR END-OF-SERVICE BENEFIT SELECTION

At any time before the end of your tenth month of service, you may change your post-service benefit to the cash stipend if you originally elected the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. To make this change, you must select the stipend under “In-Service Benefits” in

your [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) account. **If you initially elected the end-of-**

**service stipend, you cannot switch to the education award.** Members serving in the summer associate program do not have the ability to change their end-of-service benefit selection once a selection has been made.



## TENTH MONTH

### Future Plans Form

You will need to complete an AmeriCorps Future Plans Form in the tenth month of your service. The form is on your member homepage in [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) under “Close-of-Service.” This form requires you to notify AmeriCorps if you are ending your service as scheduled, or if you are requesting continuation of service. Your termination date is usually 365 days following the day you begin service. You should complete this form in [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) at least 60 days before your end-of-service date. Your supervisor will review your form at least 45 days before your end-of-service date. You will have an opportunity to review your supervisor's remarks and enter additional comments before the form is processed.

### Extension of Service

Sometimes members find that the tasks to which they have committed their service cannot be completed within one year. In this case, members and their sponsoring organization may request an extension of the first year of service for a period of no less than two weeks to no more than six months. Requests are subject to AmeriCorps Field Office approval.

You can only receive a prorated end-of-service stipend for the period of extended service.

## **Reenrollment for an Additional Year**

You may also reenroll for an additional year of service without a break between terms. You may pursue an additional year with your current project, or you may decide to serve with a different project. If you are considering pursuing another term of service with a different project, you should visit [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) to search for service opportunities by location, skill areas, or issues of interest. You also may want to consider applying to become a leader (see [Chapter 10](#)).

The decision to extend, reenroll, or be designated as a leader requires the approval of the AmeriCorps Field Office. Approval to extend, reenroll, or become a leader is dependent on AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA program policy, the funding available to AmeriCorps, the nature of the agreement between AmeriCorps and the sponsoring organization, and your performance and conduct as a member. Members are not entitled to an extension, reinstatement, or reenrollment as a member or leader in the AmeriCorps VISTA program.

## **LAST THREE WEEKS**

In the last three weeks of your service, you should prepare to leave your sponsoring organization and phase out of your service as a member. (See [Chapter 12](#) for the end-of-service checklist of things you should do to ensure this transition is as smooth as possible.) If you elected to receive the cash stipend at the end of your service year, you will receive \$400 of your accrued stipend (minus federal income tax and FICA [Social Security] deductions) in the living allowance payment for the next-to-the-last pay period of your service year. The remaining stipend balance is disbursed in the last pay period of your term of service.

If you extend service, the end-of-service benefit (Education Award or cash stipend) will be disbursed at the end of the full year term of service. A cash stipend will begin accruing as the end-of-service benefit for your extension period.

## **AFTER YOU COMPLETE YOUR YEAR OF SERVICE**

Your AmeriCorps VISTA healthcare benefits end at 11:59 p.m. on the day you end service. After ending service, you have up to 30 days to convert your healthcare benefits via the Health Insurance Marketplace at [healthcare.gov](https://healthcare.gov) (see [Chapter 8](#)).

If you elected an end-of-service stipend, please review [Chapter 5](#). If you elected the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, see [Chapter 6](#).

See [Chapter 12](#) for more information about Life After VISTA.

## Chapter 3: Serving at Your Project

### SERVING AT YOUR PROJECT

Before a member is assigned, a sponsoring organization develops a project to address identified needs of a low-income community. The community and sponsoring organization work collaboratively to design the project. A member's assignment is designed so that when the project is completed, the low-income community is better equipped to solve its own problems, and the systems, services, funding, and organization remain in the community to continue the efforts initiated by the project.

### PROJECT APPLICATION



The project application details the specific problem the project will address in the low-income community, provides a set of goals and objectives for the overall project, and includes a project plan that describes the activities the member will undertake.

The project application serves as an important assessment and recruitment tool. The performance measures portion of the application is the basis of subsequent Project Progress Reports, which are used by AmeriCorps staff to monitor the achievement of project goals. The assignment description portion of the application is used to recruit and assign members and to summarize their required duties and skills.

### SUPERVISING MEMBERS

The sponsoring organization designates a supervisor to oversee the project and the efforts of members at each site. Your supervisor provides day-to-day direction and guides your service as a member. You do not, however, have an employment relationship with the sponsoring organization. You are a member and are accountable to the AmeriCorps VISTA program. You are, nonetheless, required to act in a professional manner and conduct yourself with utmost decorum in accordance with the sponsoring organization's workplace policies and procedures.

It is not uncommon for supervisors to have significant job responsibilities other than those related to AmeriCorps VISTA. Their supervision is needed to result in a successful project and member experience. It is critical that you and your supervisor are clear regarding oversight, communication, and operating expectations. The opportune time to address this issue is at the beginning of your service year during On-Site Orientation and Training.



In preparing to support you in your role as a member, your supervisor should consider all aspects of your assignment, including:

- Your day-to-day tasks on the project
- The relationship of your tasks to the work of the sponsoring organization's staff members
- The sponsoring organization staff's understanding of your role
- The target community's expectations of you and for the project
- The resources, facilities (e.g., reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities), and supplies needed for your assignment

Your duties cannot supplant or displace those of paid staff or existing volunteers.

Your role as a member in the project should be made clear to community members and sponsoring organization staff well before your arrival. Much of your supervisor's role is to anticipate your needs and reactions, as well as those with whom you come in contact while working on the project.

Your supervisor is responsible for structuring assignments so that your health and safety are not jeopardized during your service.

## Chapter 4: Training for Members

### **TRAINING FOR MEMBERS**

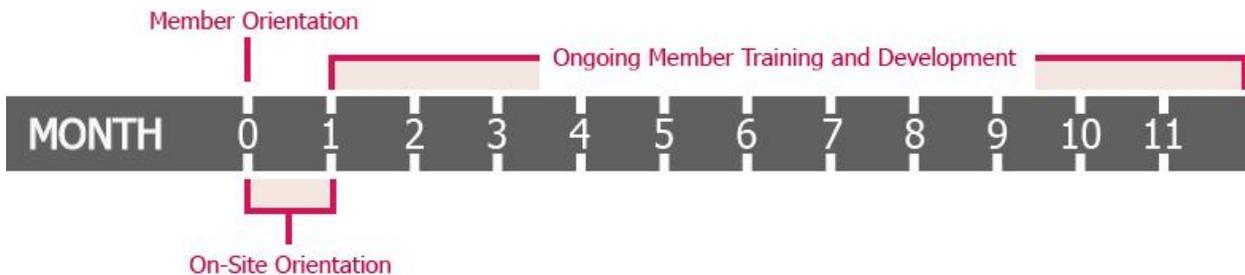
AmeriCorps VISTA training encompasses a range of activities and resources offered by AmeriCorps and your sponsoring organization throughout your term of service and

includes professional development opportunities you seek out for yourself. AmeriCorps VISTA training encompasses a range of activities and resources offered by AmeriCorps and your sponsoring organization throughout your term of service and



includes professional development opportunities you seek out for yourself. During training, starting with VISTA Member Orientation (VMO), you will be challenged to take an active role in the process. The training experience is an opportunity for you to explore issues surrounding poverty, your community, and AmeriCorps VISTA programming; build community among your fellow members as well as with your sponsor; and to develop your professional and life skills.

Once at your site and in the community, you will need to continue to improve your skills, including your knowledge of national and local resources and your understanding of the attitudes that contribute to or inhibit effective working relationships. The training required may be as formal as workshop sessions organized by sponsoring organizations or webinars offered by the AmeriCorps VISTA training team or as informal as self-initiated study at the local library. Training is a continuous process of capacity development and enhancement for an assignment in which you are required to provide much of the initiative and make many of the decisions.



## VISTA MEMBER ORIENTATION

VISTA Member Orientation (VMO) is the first formal stage in your learning process about the AmeriCorps VISTA program. VMO incorporates self-directed online tutorials, facilitated webinars, onsite training (designed and implemented by the sponsor), and online tutorials to support your learning on site and in the community.

To fully participate in and complete the VMO, it is recommended that you have a high-school equivalence of English language proficiency, the ability to communicate

verbally (speaking and hearing), access to a computer (laptop or desktop computer) with reliable internet connection, telephone service (VOIP, landline or cell phone service), and basic proficiency and comfort with computer-based, distance learning. AmeriCorps is committed to the full inclusion of all qualified applicants. If you require reasonable accommodation or assistance to participate in VMO, please contact your [Field Office](#).

VMO begins with a series of self-directed online tutorials that introduce you to the AmeriCorps VISTA program, the benefits of serving, and the terms and conditions of service.

The orientation provides a basic knowledge and understanding of the following:

- Mission and structure of AmeriCorps
- Philosophy and goals of the AmeriCorps VISTA program
- AmeriCorps VISTA legal and administrative requirements
- Terms, conditions, and benefits of your service

You are expected to attend all VMO sessions and to act in a professional manner at all times. Failure to attend sessions, to successfully complete assignments, and/or to behave appropriately, as determined by AmeriCorps staff, may result in deselection or termination from the AmeriCorps VISTA program.

In VMO, you take the Oath of Service on the first day of your service term, during the first webinar session. Issues of suitability for service are addressed over the initial weeks of service and throughout the service year.

## **ON-SITE ORIENTATION AND TRAINING**

On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) is an extension of VMO. It takes place immediately after you report to your project site. Your sponsoring organization conducts the orientation, building on concepts presented during VMO. OSOT may continue for an extended period because it involves introducing you to the sponsoring organization, the local community, and your role within the community. OSOT plans are developed by the sponsoring organization and reviewed and approved by the AmeriCorps Field Office.

The objectives of OSOT are to provide a basic knowledge and understanding of the following:

- Background, purpose, and structure of the sponsoring organization
- Roles and responsibilities for you and other members within the organization

- Roles and responsibilities of your supervisor that are related to AmeriCorps VISTA
- Job responsibilities of your supervisor other than those associated with AmeriCorps VISTA
- Schedules in order to establish regular meeting times between you and your supervisor as well as other staff members
- Personnel and attendance policies of the sponsoring organization, including use of equipment such as computers and the Internet
- Specific member assignments and skills needed to accomplish tasks
- Professional development resources available to you
- Evaluation of the project's progress by the sponsoring organization
- Background of the local community and identification of community leaders
- Nature of the low-income population served by the project
- Potential resources that can be applied to achieve project goals

Moreover, following VMO, any topics that need to be discussed in greater depth, are addressed in the OSOT.

## **ONGOING MEMBER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT**

Ongoing member training and development refers to learning opportunities that occur after VMO and OSOT that develop knowledge and skills needed to perform your assignment. These opportunities take place throughout your service: Early on, such experience develops the knowledge and skills identified by you and your supervisor; later in service, the training may relate to your VAD, or life as a member, or poverty and national socio-economic issues.

The principles of member training and development are that the learning:

1. Be timely and appropriate to your needs
2. Develop skills required of you in your VAD or in your service as an AmeriCorps member in VISTA
3. Be an appropriate use of resources, including money and time

Learning opportunities may be a course, conference, webinar, or professional development activity (such as shadowing a colleague) that meets your professional development needs. Topics may include but are not limited to fundraising, volunteer mobilization, grassroots leadership, group dynamics, media relations, project sustainability, and specific training in program issue areas. Training topics also include living on the living allowance and writing a resume based on your service.

Mentoring or coaching provided by your supervisor, through weekly meetings during the service year, are also important components of your professional development.

Ongoing member training and development is designed to improve program quality and support networking among the members, sponsoring organization staff, and individuals that are engaged in similar activities. You and your supervisor should identify your professional development needs. The training may be conducted by the sponsoring organization, AmeriCorps VISTA headquarters, the AmeriCorps Field Office, an intermediary organization, or a partnership among some or all of these entities.

## **ONLINE RESOURCES**

Several websites provide information related to AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps including:

The VISTA Campus: <https://learn.americorps.gov>

The VISTA Campus is a comprehensive online learning center for the AmeriCorps VISTA community. For members, the Campus is the starting point for orientation and information about the service year, as well as a place for ongoing learning to inform your AmeriCorps service experience.



The Campus contains material to help members understand the AmeriCorps VISTA program and the unique role members play in the organizations and communities where they serve; learn how to adapt successfully to life as a member; understand how to carry out their service assignments; and successfully transition to “life after AmeriCorps.”

The Campus includes online forums that allow members to exchange ideas and resources related to all aspects of AmeriCorps VISTA life and service. Members use the forums to raise issues, get answers, and offer support to each other.

The VISTA Campus also serves as an online resource for leaders, alumni, and supervisors in key aspects of member service and project management.

[www.americorps.gov](http://www.americorps.gov)

This official website of the AmeriCorps provides information to help the public understand AmeriCorps' mission. It includes information on all AmeriCorps programs, legislative updates, program directories, forms, and press releases.

This website also includes information regarding “[Employers of National Service](#)” and educational institutions that actively recruit AmeriCorps alumni and offer incentives for attendance at their institutions.

Employers of National Service connects AmeriCorps and Peace Corps alumni with employers from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Through this initiative, employers have increased access to a dedicated, highly qualified, and mission-oriented pool of potential employees, and national service alumni have additional opportunities to apply their skills in the workplace.

## Chapter 5: Financial Support

### FINANCIAL SUPPORT

AmeriCorps provides a living allowance to you to cover the cost of food, housing, and other basic necessities during service. Amounts are low because you are expected to live at approximately the same economic level as the people you are serving.

AmeriCorps assumes no financial responsibility for a member other than the allowances and benefits provided to a member as discussed in this handbook or as determined by AmeriCorps. Similarly, AmeriCorps assumes no financial responsibility for a member's spouse or dependent children.

### LIVING ALLOWANCE

Upon starting service as an AmeriCorps member, you will begin receiving a living allowance. AmeriCorps determines the living allowance rate, which varies according to the local cost of living in the area where you serve (see [VISTA Living Allowance Rates by County](#) for more information about the living allowance rate in the area where you serve). Each year, AmeriCorps VISTA conducts an analysis of the living allowance rates to ensure compliance with our governing legislation, the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended (DVSA). The review consists of comparing poverty rates with the cost of housing in each county where our members and leaders serve.

Member living allowances are computed on a daily rate and paid every 14 days. Payments to members are made via direct deposit. See the [Living Allowance Calendar and Statement Information](#) for direct deposit dates. It is essential that you enter your direct deposit information correctly before starting service. Failure to do so will result in at least a two week delay in receiving your living allowance.

Federal income tax deductions are withheld from the living allowance. No state, county, or city tax deductions are withheld. However, you are responsible for paying those taxes, as appropriate.

Members are not eligible to receive unemployment compensation for their service. (See [Chapter 15](#) for information on income exclusion of benefits under federal, state, and local assistance programs.)

### **END-OF-SERVICE BENEFIT**

Prior to VISTA Member Orientation, you will elect to receive either the end-of-service stipend or the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. Members may only receive one of these benefits.

### **END-OF-SERVICE STIPEND**

The end-of-service cash stipend is awarded to members who successfully complete 12 months of service. Members generally do not receive a stipend if they do not complete 12 months of service. However, if a member's service ends early for a compelling personal circumstance, the member may receive a prorated stipend (see the Prorated Stipend section below).

The end-of-service stipend accrues at the daily rate. See chart below for rates.

Members	\$4.94/day
Leaders	\$8.22/day

Members who extend their service term receive a stipend at the appropriate daily rate for the extension period. The end-of-service stipend is the only end-of-service benefit available during an extension period. Federal income tax and FICA (Social Security and Medicare) deductions are withheld from the stipend at the time of payment.



Members electing to receive the end-of-service stipend at the end of their service year receive \$400 of their accrued stipend (minus federal income tax and FICA deductions) in the living allowance payment for the next-to-the-last pay period of their service year. The remaining stipend balance is disbursed in the last pay period of their term of service.

Members extending service receive the end-of-service stipend for their extension period in the final pay period of the extension period. If a member reenrolls and elects the stipend as their post-service benefit, a stipend (if elected for the first year) is disbursed as outlined above, and another stipend accrues during the second term.

### **PRORATED END-OF-SERVICE STIPEND**

In rare circumstances, members who leave service early for a compelling personal circumstance and who elected to receive an end-of-service stipend, may qualify for a prorated stipend. You may be eligible for a prorated end-of-service stipend if you have completed at least 15 percent (55 days) of your required service term and leave service early because of a compelling personal circumstance. A detailed discussion of situations that constitute a compelling personal circumstance and other extenuating circumstances that qualify for such a prorated end-of-service stipend, is presented in Chapter 13: Administrative Policies, under the section called Early Termination of a VISTA Member for a Compelling Personal Circumstance. Because the end-of-service stipend accrues at a daily rate, a prorated end-of-service stipend is based on the number of days served.

## **SEGAL AMERICORPS EDUCATION AWARD**

The Segal AmeriCorps Education Award (education award) is a post service benefit that is used to pay for education costs at eligible institutions of higher education, for educational training, or to repay eligible student loans. The education award for a year of full-time service equals the maximum Pell Grant level during the fiscal year in which a member begins service. Members can use the education award in full or in part and can take up to seven years after a term of service has ended to use the award.

Before VISTA Member Orientation, members select an end-of-service benefit in [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov). Members have the option to choose either the end-of service stipend, as discussed above, or the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. Members cannot choose both. If a member selects the education award and passes away during service, AmeriCorps will consider the election of the education award rescinded and the member's designated beneficiary or estate will receive a prorated end-of-service stipend. (See [Chapter 6](#) for a complete discussion of the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. Refer to the VISTA Campus at <https://learn.americorps.gov> for tips on using the award effectively.) Additional information about the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award is available here: <https://americorps.gov/members-volunteers/segal-ameri-corps-education-award>.

## **PRORATED SEGAL AMERICORPS EDUCATION AWARD**

In rare circumstances, members who leave service early for a compelling personal circumstance and who elected to receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award may qualify for a prorated education award. A detailed discussion of the reasons members may qualify for a prorated education award is in Chapter 6: Education Benefits, under the section called If You Elect the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award.

## **CHANGING YOUR END-OF-SERVICE BENEFIT SELECTION**

At any time prior to the end of the 10th month of service, members who initially elect the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award can change their decision and elect the end-of-service stipend. To do so, you must click on the 'Edit End-of-service Option' link on your [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) member home page and select the stipend as the end-of-service benefit. You must make this change before the end of your 10th month of service. AmeriCorps does not send a reminder to do this. After making this change, you cannot make any further changes. (See [Chapter 6](#) for a complete discussion of the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award.)

However, members who elect the end-of service stipend cannot, at any time, switch to the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. (See [Chapter 6](#) for information on education benefits.)



Members who reenroll have the option to select either the end-of-service stipend or education award for their additional year of service. Members may earn up to the aggregate value of two full education awards.

### **SETTLING-IN ALLOWANCE**

Members serving a 12-month term and moving 50 miles or more from their home of record to their project site are eligible to receive a settling-in allowance of \$750. This allowance is intended to help cover initial moving expenses (security deposit, utility deposit, etc.). The settling-in allowance is subject to federal income tax deduction, and it is disbursed in the first living allowance payment.

### **EMERGENCY EXPENSE ALLOWANCE**

The director of the VISTA Member Support Unit may authorize a one-time expense allowance to cover extraordinary costs, such as reimbursement for theft, fire loss, or special clothing necessitated by severe climate. This allowance is not intended to supplement the living expenses of members. The sponsoring organization can assist members in requesting an Emergency Expense Allowance through the VISTA Member Support Unit.

Members, leaders, and candidates are responsible for safeguarding their personal property. Neither AmeriCorps nor the AmeriCorps VISTA program is an insurer of personal property or cash and does not replace or reimburse for the loss of personal property or cash. Emergency funds are also not appropriate to use for costs associated with car accidents, routine car maintenance or repair. Expense allowances are paid directly to the member by AmeriCorps.

## **HOW DO MEMBERS GET PAID?**

### **DIRECT DEPOSIT**

Members are required to have the biweekly living allowance sent via electronic funds transfer or direct deposit. The U.S. Treasury requires federal payments to be made by direct deposit, except when this form of payment would cause unusual hardship on the payee.

To set up direct deposit, members must complete the direct deposit form under 'My Living Allowance' in [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov). Members need their bank account number and their bank's routing number. Members should contact their banking institution with questions.

Members must be certain to enter direct deposit information correctly before beginning service. Failure to do so will result in at least a two-week delay in receiving the living allowance payment.

Please note that direct deposit information is not located on ATM or credit cards. Members that do not currently have a bank account may open an Electronic Transfer Account for a nominal monthly fee. To learn more, visit [www.eta-find.gov](http://www.eta-find.gov).

Members are responsible for updating direct deposit information under 'My Living Allowance' in [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) any time a bank or account number is changed or closed. [Review this short video](#) about member direct deposit.

All regular biweekly living allowances, as well as any other taxable allowances, are recorded on the member's earnings statement. Earnings statements can be viewed on [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) under 'My Living Allowance.' A member Living Allowance Calendar and Statement Information are available [here](#) on the AmeriCorps website. Members assigned to sponsors supported by program grants receive the living allowance payment directly from the sponsoring organization (not AmeriCorps) and may obtain earnings statements directly from the sponsoring organization.

### **PAPER CHECK PAYMENT (EXCEPTION ONLY)**

If a member believes that receiving living allowance payments electronically will cause undue hardship, the member may waive direct deposit through [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) homepage under 'my Living Allowance'. The member must click 'Waive direct deposit' and provide a justification.

If a member chooses to receive a paper check for hardship reasons, AmeriCorps mails the checks directly to the sponsoring organization.



The sponsoring organization's address is listed in the 'My Living Allowance' section on each member's [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) homepage. If the project address is incorrect, the member should contact the appropriate AmeriCorps Field Office. Members can view earnings statements on the [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) homepage under 'My Living Allowance'.

Checks mistakenly sent to the sponsoring organization for members who have terminated early or who are no longer on the project must be returned immediately to the U.S. Treasury, and the AmeriCorps Field Office should be notified right away. AmeriCorps regards the sponsoring organization as the responsible agent for distributing members' checks. Members' check envelopes must not be opened by any sponsoring organization personnel.

Allowances not subject to federal income or Social Security taxes are paid directly by AmeriCorps and are not reflected in the earnings statement. The member receives an explanation of any payment along with the check. Such checks usually cover travel and per diem expenses.

## LOST CHECK

If a member does not receive a check, the member should confer with the supervisor and wait at least five days to make sure the check has not been misplaced or is a few days late. If the supervisor determines the check is lost or stolen after a five-day wait, the member should notify the VISTA Member Support Unit by calling the National Service Hotline at 1-800-942-2677. **The use of electronic funds transfer (direct deposit) eliminates this problem.**

The VISTA Member Support Unit will notify AmeriCorps Headquarters Payroll Office of the loss and arrange for another check to be sent. This process can take up to six weeks. If the member eventually receives the lost check, the member should not cash it. The member should instead immediately return the check to the U.S.

Treasury. Failure to return a lost check results in an overpayment. See *"Recovery of Overpayment"* in [Chapter 5](#) for the procedure used to collect these funds.

## **TAXES: OBLIGATIONS, WITHHOLDINGS, AND CREDITS**

Members pay taxes. All AmeriCorps VISTA allowances, except service related travel payments (discussed in [Chapter 7](#): Travel and Transportation Support) and emergency expense allowances, are subject to federal and state income taxes.

### **FEDERAL TAXES**

AmeriCorps withholds federal income tax from the regular biweekly allowance payment. While the biweekly allowance payment does not constitute wages for work, it does constitute federally taxable income. Members must complete a W-4 form in [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) on the member homepage under ‘My Living Allowance’ to determine the amount of income tax that should be withheld. A member may claim exempt status on the W-4 form if the member believes they are exempt from having federal income tax withheld. The W-4 form explains the eligibility requirements for tax-exempt status. Exemption from income tax withholding expires February 15 of the following year. Members wishing to renew this status for the new year must complete a new W-4. If a member does not re-file for this exemption, Federal taxes will be withheld beginning in the next pay period. See IRS Publication 505 for more information about W-4s and withholdings.

### **STATE, COUNTY, AND MUNICIPAL TAXES**

AmeriCorps does not withhold any state, county, or city income tax from the living allowance; however, members are still responsible for all taxes. Saving a portion of the living allowance each month is a wise way to accrue funds needed for state and local income taxes. Members should contact the state and local government tax offices in the state in which they serve and/or where they maintain a permanent residence to help determine the amount of funds needed to pay taxes.

### **SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE**

FICA (Social Security and Medicare) is withheld from the end-of-service stipend and submitted to the Internal Revenue Service at the time the stipend is paid to the member. The total stipend the member receives may be counted under Social Security regulations toward credits of coverage. The term “coverage” refers to the

accumulation of 40 credits (ten years) necessary for an individual to receive Social Security benefits at retirement. The amounts required for credits of coverage are adjusted annually by the Social Security Administration. Members seeking to obtain “coverage” should contact a local Social Security office to determine if the stipend amount is sufficient to be applied.

FICA is not withheld from the living allowance.

## **W-2 FORM-STATEMENT OF EARNINGS AND TAXES WITHHELD**

AmeriCorps will mail a W-2 form to each member by January 31 of each year showing the amount of earnings and the amount of federal taxes withheld for the preceding calendar year. AmeriCorps will also post an electronic copy of the W-2 form under ‘My Tax Statements’ on [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov). If the W-2 form has not arrived by February 15, members should notify the VISTA Member Support Unit via the National Service Hotline at 800-942-2677. Members should also update any changes to permanent and mailing addresses in [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) as soon as possible to ensure the W-2 is sent to the correct address.

Members receiving the living allowance directly from the sponsoring organization will also receive the W-2 form directly from the sponsoring organization. An electronic version of the W-2 form will not be available in [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) for these members. These members should follow up directly with the sponsoring organization if they have any questions about the W-2 form.

## **EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT**

Under the Tax Reform Act of 1986, certain families with limited income may be eligible for earned income tax credit (EITC). Earned income tax credit is an amount that is subtracted from taxes owed. If a member’s credit is larger than the tax owed or if there is no tax, the member may be eligible for a refund from the Internal Revenue Service even if income tax is not withheld from pay. EITC is based on earned income, including AmeriCorps VISTA allowances.

The Internal Revenue Service determines an individual’s eligibility for EITC. It is not the responsibility of AmeriCorps to verify eligibility. Members that expect to qualify for EITC or are unsure should contact the Internal Revenue Service to verify eligibility.

Members who are eligible for EITC can claim the credit on their tax returns. A form 1040, 1040A, or 1040EZ must be filed to claim EITC even if no taxes are withheld from allowances during the year.

Receipt of EITC may affect benefit levels under certain public assistance programs. Therefore, it is advisable to check with these programs before filing for EITC.

## **DEDUCTIONS FROM ALLOWANCES**

With a member's written permission, AmeriCorps will make deductions from the biweekly living allowance payment to cover court-ordered or voluntary child support or alimony payments and court-ordered bankruptcy. IRS tax levy deductions will be made without a member's permission. Such deductions will be shown under "Tax and Court Levies" on the earnings statement.

## **RECOVERY OF OVERPAYMENT**

Overpayments to members, when they occur, are debts to the federal government and may include travel allowance payments greater than the amount to which a member is entitled or living allowance payments that exceed the amount to which a member is entitled. To avoid such overpayments, members should give the sponsoring organization and AmeriCorps a two-week notice in writing if leaving early from service.

A member that is overpaid during the service term will be notified in writing and given the opportunity to repay the overpaid amount.

If a member does not pay the outstanding balance in full before or shortly after leaving service, the member must set up a payment plan with AmeriCorps. Members may also make payments online at [www.pay.gov](http://www.pay.gov). To make an online payment, members should direct payments to the Corporation for National and Community Service, or CNCS, the official name for AmeriCorps. To recover any overpayment remaining after completion of service AmeriCorps initiates the debt collection process if a payment plan is not in place.

Failure to repay debt owed to AmeriCorps may delay or totally preclude the receipt of the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award.

## **CHILD CARE**

AmeriCorps VISTA offers childcare benefits to members who qualify. To qualify for the VISTA childcare benefit, you must meet the following eligibility requirements:

- Your family income does not exceed the limit determined by the state in which the childcare is provided (75% of the state's median income for a family of the same size). This limit is different for each state and may change annually. The total family income is used to determine your income eligibility. Your living allowance is disregarded in determining family income.
- You do not already receive a childcare subsidy from another source for the same child which would continue to be provided while you serve in the program.
- You must be the parent or legal guardian of a child under age 13.
- Your child must reside with you.

GAP Solutions, Inc. (GAPSI) currently administers the childcare benefit program for AmeriCorps VISTA, and you must apply directly to GAPSI for the childcare benefit. You can apply online at [www.americorpschildcare.com](http://www.americorpschildcare.com) (recommended). All downloadable forms are found under “Forms/Resources.” GAPSI can be reached at 855-886-0687 (toll-free) or via email at [AmericorpsChildCare@gapsi.com](mailto:AmericorpsChildCare@gapsi.com) if you need assistance.

As administrator, GAPSI pays the childcare subsidy directly to your provider. GAPSI also verifies the following:

- Your current enrollment in AmeriCorps VISTA
- Your family income, which must comply with state regulations
- Eligibility of your childcare provider to provide childcare in your state
- Your child’s attendance in childcare during the time for which the provider submitted an invoice
- Age of the child (the member must produce evidence of the child’s birth date)

## **STATE BENEFIT LIMITS**

Each state has different benefit limits for childcare to eligible households. The VISTA program looks to these state limits for guidance in determining eligibility and the level of benefit. The VISTA subsidy cannot exceed the prevailing rate in the state in which the care is provided. The prevailing rate is determined by each state and may change

each year. If the state’s prevailing rate is less than the amount charged by your provider, the lower rate will be paid.

In some states, the VISTA childcare benefit is less than a benefit that you may qualify to receive from another source. GAP Solutions, Inc. routinely advises you of superior benefits when aware of them.

## HOUSING ASSISTANCE

Sponsoring organizations are prohibited from providing direct monetary assistance to members for housing, but they may help members with housing in several ways. Some sponsors elect, but are not required, to provide housing subsidies directly to landlords for rent support (see “Member Housing” in [Chapter 14](#)).

For more information and links related to your benefits, please visit the [benefits of service section](#) of the AmeriCorps website.

## MEMBER ALLOWANCES AT A GLANCE

Type of Allowance	Amount Received and When	Purpose	Federal Taxes
<b>Settling-In Allowance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$750</li> <li>• For members serving a 12-month term and relocating 50 miles or more</li> <li>• First living allowance payment</li> </ul>	<b>One-time payment for settling-in expenses</b>	<b>Federal taxes withheld at time of payment</b>
<b>Living Allowance</b>	<p><b>Amount varies by county</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate based on poverty income for a single individual in the area</li> <li>• Paid biweekly</li> </ul>	<b>Housing, food, and utilities</b>	<p><b>Federal taxes withheld biweekly</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State and local taxes not withheld—member is responsible for paying them</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>FICA (Social Security) not withheld—member is not responsible for paying FICA</li> </ul>
<b>Emergency Expense Allowance</b>	<b>Discretionary allowance varies</b>	<b>One-time reimbursement for theft, fire loss, special clothing</b>	<b>Federal taxes are <i>not</i> withheld at time of payment</b>
<b>End-of-Service Stipend</b> (Only for those <i>not</i> choosing the AmeriCorps Education Award)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accrues at the rate of \$4.94 per day</li> <li>Disbursed with the last two living allowance payments upon successful completion of service</li> <li>Only end-of-service option available for VISTA members who are not US citizens, US nationals, or lawful permanent resident aliens</li> </ul>	<b>Cash allowance at end of service</b>	<b>Federal taxes and FICA withheld at time of payment</b>
<b>AmeriCorps Education Award</b> (Only for those <i>not</i> choosing the end-of-service stipend)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Award for a year of full-time service equal to the maximum Federal Pell Grant level during the fiscal year a member begins service</li> <li>Disbursed electronically for educational expenses</li> <li>Must be a US citizen, US national, or lawful</li> </ul>	<b>Payment of student loans and expenses to educational institutions</b>	<b>Subject to federal taxes in the year the award is used</b>

	permanent resident alien to be eligible		
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## Chapter 6: Benefits Toward Education

### EDUCATION BENEFITS



At the beginning of your service as a member, you elect to receive the end-of-service stipend or the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award (education award) as your post-service benefit. The education award may be used to repay eligible student loans or pay for educational costs at eligible institutions of higher education.

By law, only members who are either: US citizens, US nationals, or lawful permanent resident aliens (sometimes referred to as “lawful permanent residents”) are eligible to receive an education award. Persons legally residing in a state, but who are not US citizens, US nationals, or lawful permanent residents, are only eligible to receive an end-of-service stipend.

Members and leaders select a post-service benefit prior to their start of service. If you initially choose the education award, you may change your election to the stipend any time before the end of your tenth month of service on the [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) home page under the “Edit End-of-Service Option.” **You may not change from an end-of-service stipend to the education award.** Summer associates do not have the ability to change their end-of-service benefit selection once selected.

### IF YOU ELECT THE END-OF-SERVICE STIPEND

If you elect the end-of-service cash stipend, you may be eligible for the following education benefits:

- Deferment of eligible student loans
- Cancellation of Federal Perkins Loans
-

## **STUDENT LOAN DEFERMENT DURING SERVICE**

As a general rule, members may obtain a deferment (discussed later in this chapter) of payments on the principal of any federally guaranteed student loan for the length of their service. For federal student loans, interest deferments and/or subsidies may also be available. The terms and conditions of available deferments differ depending on the type of loan, the date the loan was disbursed, and the policies of the individual loan holder. Some older federal student loan programs allow members a categorical deferment. Newer federal loan programs may require that you apply for an “economic hardship” deferment.

AmeriCorps does not grant student loan deferments; loan holders grant student loan deferments. To apply for deferment, please follow the guidance on the deferment request form specific to your loan. You can find supporting documents often needed to apply for deferment, such as your VISTA Currently Serving Certification letter and recent earnings statements on your [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) member homepage.

If your deferment request form requires signed verification of your status as a member, send the form to the VMSU for certification:

AmeriCorps  
250 E Street SW  
Suite 4300, Mailroom  
Washington, DC 20525  
Attn: VMSU

Depending on your loan type, you may not be responsible for paying the interest that accrues on your loan during the deferment period. Please contact the Federal Student Aid Information Center at 800-433-3243 or visit [www.studentaid.ed.gov](http://www.studentaid.ed.gov) for more information.

## **POST-SERVICE CANCELLATION OF FEDERAL PERKINS LOANS**

If you choose to earn an end-of service stipend, you may be eligible for cancellation of a portion of your Federal Perkins Loan for completion of a full year of AmeriCorps VISTA service. However, you may not receive an education award and related interest benefits from the National Service Trust (described below) for a term of service and have that same service credited toward repayment, discharge, or cancellation of other student loans.

When you elect the stipend, 15% of your total Perkins Loan obligation plus the accrued annual interest will be canceled for the first and second years of completed AmeriCorps VISTA service. For the third completed year of service, 20% of your total Perkins Loan obligation plus the accrued annual interest will be cancelled.

To determine which student loans may be eligible for cancellation and to receive forms, contact the Federal Student Aid Information Center at 800-433-3243 or visit [www.studentaid.ed.gov](http://www.studentaid.ed.gov).

### **IF YOU ELECT THE SEGAL AMERICORPS EDUCATION AWARD**

The Segal AmeriCorps Education Award is equal to the maximum amount of the Pell Grant during the fiscal year in which the member begins service. The federal government's fiscal year is October 1 – September 30. The amount of the Pell Grant can change each year. Hence, the full education award can change to match future changes to the Pell Grant amount.

The education award's association with the Pell Grant means members will receive awards of different monetary values depending on when they begin service. For award amount, limitations, and eligibility rules, please visit <https://americorps.gov/members-volunteers/segal-ameri-corps-education-award>.

Three types of education benefits are available to members who choose the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award:

- A post-service education award in the form of a voucher (not cash) that can be used to pay for higher education (degree or non-degree) or to repay eligible student loans
- A postponement of payments on qualified student loans during the time served in AmeriCorps VISTA (called a forbearance)
- A payment of up to 100% of the accrued interest

### **OVERVIEW OF SEGAL AMERICORPS EDUCATION AWARD**

You may earn up to the aggregate value of two full-time education awards in your lifetime.

An education award can be used in the following ways:

- To repay qualified student loans (loans in the student’s name that are backed by the federal government or made by a state agency)
- To pay for all or part of the cost of attending an eligible institution of higher education

Unlike AmeriCorps State and National grant programs, AmeriCorps members serving in VISTA do not have the option to transfer their Education Award to a family member.

For more information, see the [Education Award tutorial](#) and visit <https://americorps.gov/members-volunteers/segal-ameri-corps-education-award>.

## **NATIONAL SERVICE TRUST**

The National Service Trust is an account in the U.S. Treasury from which AmeriCorps makes payments to education and financial institutions on behalf of AmeriCorps participants who have successfully completed a term of service in an approved national service position. The Office of the National Service Trust, frequently referred to as the Trust, is the department within AmeriCorps that manages all functions related to the education award. (See the end of this chapter for resource information provided by the Trust.)

## **EDUCATION AWARD AMOUNT**

The Segal AmeriCorps Education Award amount is tied to the maximum amount of the Federal Pell Grant. The maximum amount of the Pell Grant can change each year. Hence, the full education award can change to match future changes to the Pell Grant amount.

Occasionally, part-time, reduced part-time, and other special programs are offered (for example, a summer associate program) that include a “less than full year” award. This award is reduced proportionally to reflect the length of the program. Such education awards count towards the aggregate value of two awards an individual may be eligible to receive.

## HOW TO QUALIFY

As a member, you are eligible to receive a full education award from the National Service Trust if:

1. You successfully complete a term of service in an approved national service position; and
2. You are a citizen, national, or lawful permanent resident alien of the United States.

Your election is made when you complete the End-of-Service Benefit selection on your [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) member homepage at the beginning of each term of AmeriCorps VISTA service and indicate whether you want to receive an education award or an end-of-service stipend. If you elect the stipend benefit at the beginning of your service, you may not change your mind and elect the education award. However, you can change your initial election of the education award to the stipend at any time before the end of the tenth month of service.

## RESTRICTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

### Number of Awards

While you, as a member, may be eligible to serve up to five years as a VISTA member, you can only receive the value of two education awards. For any additional terms served after you have earned two full education awards, you may select the end-of-service cash stipend as the end-of-service benefit. If you serve less than full-year terms in the VISTA program, you may be able to earn additional pro-rated awards (not to exceed the aggregate value of two full awards). Alternatively, you may also elect to receive a \$0 (zero) value education award; doing such could result in the accrual of interest benefits and qualify you for loan deferment.

### Time Limit on Use of Education Award

You must use each education award within seven (7) years after the date you complete your term of service. You can apply for an extension if:

- You were unavoidably prevented from using the education award during the seven-year use period for reasons such as:
  - Serious illness or disability experienced by you

- Death or serious illness or disability of someone in your immediate family (mother, father, sibling, spouse, domestic partner, child, grandparent, grandchild)
- Important service records maintained by the program were destroyed or are inaccessible
- You successfully completed a subsequent term of service in another approved AmeriCorps position that fell within the seven-year use period of your first education award
- You served in Peace Corps or in the military for a period of time that fell within the education award's seven-year use period

Requests for extensions are submitted via [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) and must be submitted before the Education Award expires.

### **Ineligibility for Controlled Substance Conviction**

A member who is convicted under federal or state law of the possession or sale of a controlled substance is not eligible to use the education award from the date of the conviction until the end of a specified time period based on the type of conviction. To learn more about how convictions for the possession or sale of controlled substances affect an education award recipient's ability to use that award, review [45 CFR §2526.30](#). You may also contact the National Service Hotline, toll free at 800-942-2677, and ask to speak with someone at the Trust.

### **PRORATED SEGAL AMERICORPS EDUCATION AWARD**

In rare circumstances, members who leave service early for a compelling personal circumstance and who have elected to receive an end-of-service Segal AmeriCorps Education Award may qualify for a prorated education award.

A detailed discussion of situations that constitute a compelling personal circumstance and other extenuating circumstances that qualify for such a prorated award is presented in Chapter 12: Administrative Policies, under the section called Early Termination of a VISTA Member for a Compelling Personal Circumstance.

If you leave AmeriCorps VISTA service for a compelling personal circumstance (or for a public policy reason) discussed in [Chapter 12](#), and you have completed at least fifteen percent of the required term of service, you may be eligible for a prorated portion of the education award that corresponds to the portion of your term served. For example, if you began a term of service on or after October 1, 2018, and served

219 calendar days (which is 3/5 of a service year), you would earn an education award of \$3,657 ( $\$3,657 = 3/5$  of \$6,095).

Members must complete at least fifteen percent of the required term of service in order to be eligible for a prorated end-of-service benefit (55 days for full year members; nine, ten, or eleven days for summer associates). Such education awards count toward the aggregate value of two awards that an individual may be eligible to receive during his or her lifetime.

### **Early Departure for another AmeriCorps Program**

If you are accepted into another AmeriCorps program and are required to begin training or service in the other program prior to the conclusion of your AmeriCorps VISTA service, you are also eligible for a prorated education award, provided you served at least 335 calendar days in AmeriCorps VISTA.

### **QUALIFIED LOANS**

You can use your education award to repay qualified student loans you have or may acquire. Generally speaking, a "qualified student loan" is any federally backed student loan that is in the VISTA member or alumni's name. The Trust's legislation has been modified to include loans made directly to members by state agencies, such as the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education or a state university or college. This adjustment is subject to change each year with AmeriCorps' appropriation statute. Please contact the VMSU with questions about state agency loans. AmeriCorps cannot authorize payment of nonqualified loans.



If you do not know if your loans are qualified, ask your lenders. Otherwise, you may earn an education award and be unable to use it for the purposes you require. There should also be a citation on the loan papers, referring to Title IV of the Higher Education Act, Title VII or VIII of the Public Health Services Act, or the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education.

There may be student loan programs offered by schools that are not qualified. Members must be sure to ask their loan holders to see if the loans are qualified using the definition in the Trust's legislation. They should get written confirmation if there

is any question. A loan program that pays off previous qualified education loans and creates a new loan for the purpose of offering a single payment option, such as credit card consolidation, is not a qualified loan. Your education award cannot be used to repay this type of loan. There is a federal consolidation loan, however, specifically for this purpose that is a qualified Title IV loan. Members who want to consolidate qualified student loans need to make sure that they do it through a Title IV Federal Consolidation Loan if they want to use their Education Award to repay it or have the interest paid on it. If consolidation occurs after service, you will not be eligible for an interest accrual payment.

## **INSTITUTIONS MATCHING THE EDUCATION AWARD**

Many institutions offer to match the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or make other financial aid benefits, such as scholarships, tuition waivers, and in-state tuition, available to AmeriCorps alumni. Attending one of these institutions can increase the value of your education award. To view the list of institutions that offer these benefits, go to <https://americorps.gov/partner/partnerships/schools-national-service-search>.

If your schools of interest are not listed, ask these schools to consider matching the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or offering special opportunities to AmeriCorps alumni.

## **ELIGIBLE INSTITUTIONS**

### **U.S. Schools**

For purposes of the education award, an "eligible institution of higher education" is one that has a Title IV Program Participation Agreement with the U.S. Department of Education. (Title IV refers to a section of the Higher Education Act that authorizes student aid.) This means that the school participates in federal student aid programs (i.e., the institution has an agreement with the U.S. Department of Education whereby students are eligible to receive federal financial assistance to attend the school). This assistance includes Pell Grants or one of the federal loans listed under "Common Qualified Student Loans."

Veterans who have earned an AmeriCorps Education Award may use the award for education, apprenticeship, and on-the-job training at institutions that have been approved for educational benefits under the Montgomery G.I. Bill (referred to as G.I.-approved schools).

A school may be fully accredited and offer quality graduate degrees, but unless the school is G.I.- approved or participates with the U.S. Department of Education in Title IV financial assistance, the education award, by law, cannot be used there. You should make sure the school you wish to attend, or the student loan you expect to repay to an existing school, is qualified before you select the education award.

It is not possible to determine whether a school is Title IV merely by the name of the school. Most two- and four-year institutions in the United States are Title IV schools. Thousands of technical and trade schools are Title IV as well. Art schools, beauty schools, and truck driving schools may be Title IV. To become a Title IV school, an institution has to meet certain requirements and obtain a Title IV Program Participation Agreement with the U.S. Department of Education. Many of the Title IV schools are also G.I.-approved.

### **To Find Out If a School Is Eligible**

- Ask the financial aid office if the school is a Title IV institution.
- Learn if students who attend the school are eligible to use Pell Grants, Perkins Loans, or Stafford Loans to attend the school. If students are eligible for these loans, it is a Title IV school. These loans are examples of some of the most common types of Title IV assistance.
- Call the toll-free number at the U.S. Department of Education's Federal Student Aid Information Center between 9:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. (Eastern Standard Time), Monday through Friday. That number is 800-433-3243. You also can conduct an online search at the Department of Education's Web site at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov).
- If you are a veteran and can't find what you are looking for in a Title IV school, check the [Web Enabled Approval Management System \(WEAMS\)](#).

### **Foreign Schools**

The education award may be used to attend many schools outside the United States. You should always check to see if the school qualifies before enrolling if you intend to use the education award to pay for school.

If the school outside the United States participates in the U.S. Department of Education's Direct Lending Program, the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award can be used there. You can find out if a particular school participates by calling the Department of Education at 800-433-3243. Individuals who use this number should ask if the school participates in the Direct Lending Program. The caller should have the name and location of the school before making the call. This number is not for

questions concerning using the education award; it is to see if a foreign school participates in the Federal Family Education Loan (FFEL) program.

Another way to approach attending schools overseas is to obtain a qualified student loan to attend the foreign school and use the education award to repay the loan. The loan would be paid like any other qualified student loan.

Also, many Title IV post-secondary institutions in the United States offer educational opportunities abroad. As long as the member is considered by the qualified U.S. school to be a student at the school and the payment goes to the U.S. school, this is an allowable use of the education award.

## **QUALIFIED EXPENSES TO ATTEND SCHOOL**

The Segal AmeriCorps Education Award can be used to pay the portion of a member's cost of attendance that is not covered by other sources of financial aid, such as scholarships, loans, grants, and tuition or fee waivers. The U.S. Department of Education developed the term "cost of attendance" for use by Title IV schools. Schools use it whenever a student applies for federal financial assistance. It is the school's estimate of what it will cost for a student to attend for a specific period of time.

For a full-time student, qualified expenses must be attributable to a course at the certifying institution and can include tuition and fees, an allowance for books, room and board, transportation, and other expenses. It is important to note that every Title IV school determines the cost of attendance for its students. This is not an amount determined by the member or by the Trust in AmeriCorps. The cost of attendance should be used by the school to calculate the amount for which the student is eligible to use the education award.

The Segal AmeriCorps Education Award can be used for that portion of the cost of attendance that has not already been covered by other sources of financial assistance.

The cost of a computer may be included in the cost of attendance. The school's financial aid office will know if that particular school includes computers in the cost of attendance. Students should be able to learn the cost of attendance from the financial aid office before submitting their payment request.

If you are a veteran, courses and training programs eligible for payment through the Montgomery GI-Bill are eligible for AmeriCorps Education Award payments. The

institution or training establishment will have a VA-approved Certifying Official who will determine the eligible expenses.

## **BOOKSTORES AND THE EDUCATION AWARD**

The law requires that the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award be designated to an eligible school (and holders of qualified loans). The Trust requires you to communicate with the financial aid office of the eligible school you wish to attend regarding disbursement of the education award for bookstore purposes. The financial aid office monitors financial assistance received by students and is able to determine how much of a student's award the member is eligible to use and whether a student's cost of attendance has been met by other sources. The financial aid office can legally represent the school in verifying that certain requirements are met. A bookstore cannot do this.

To avoid a series of small payments to a bookstore throughout the semester, the member should consult the financial aid office for the calculated budget figure for books and supplies for the term and request that amount as a lump sum.

## **LOAN POSTPONEMENT AND INTEREST PAYMENT**

### **FORBEARANCE OR DEFERMENT?**

National service is only one of several circumstances that allow borrowers to postpone the repayment of their qualified student loans. Other situations include being a student, serving in the military, being unemployed, teaching in specific high-need areas, or working as a volunteer with a nonprofit organization. Some of these postponements are called deferments, and some are called forbearances.

Deferment is a postponement of repayment of your student loan for the length of your AmeriCorps VISTA service.

- For Federal Perkins Loans, subsidized Stafford Loans under the Federal Family Education Loan (FFEL) program, and subsidized Direct Stafford Loans, you do not have to pay principal or interest during deferment.
- For unsubsidized FFEL Stafford Loans, unsubsidized Direct Stafford Loans, FFEL PLUS Loans, and Direct PLUS Loans, you can postpone paying principal, but you are responsible for the interest.

If you are not eligible for a deferment, a forbearance permits you to postpone or reduce payments for the length of your service. Unlike deferment, for which the federal government pays the interest for you, interest continues to accumulate for loan forbearance. If you do not pay the interest as it accrues, it will be capitalized.

Special requirements and conditions are associated with each deferment and forbearance, depending on the type of loan and when it was made. These special conditions may include time limitations and quarterly interest payments.

Members who are earning an education award may be eligible for loan forbearance or deferment based on the fact they are earning an education award or based on one of the other circumstances described above. There are several advantages for obtaining forbearance based on national service versus another type of forbearance. Forbearance based on national service does not count against the time limit associated with other types of postponements. Interest payments are not required during the term of national service, even on a quarterly basis. The National Service Trust, however, only pays the accrued interest for the terms of service for which you elected the education award. Remember that any accrued interest paid on behalf of a member is subject to income taxes.

If members wish to learn more about other types of postponements for which they might be eligible, they should review their promissory note or contact their loan holder or the U.S. Department of Education.

## **LOAN FORBEARANCE**

Members who earn an education award are eligible for a type of student loan postponement called forbearance. You may be eligible to postpone the repayment of your qualified student loans while serving in AmeriCorps VISTA.

During forbearance based on national service, interest continues to accrue. If you successfully complete your term of service and earn an education award, the Trust pays all or a portion of the interest that accrued on your qualified student loan during this period. This accrued interest paid by the Trust, like the education award, is subject to income taxes.

To place a loan in forbearance, you need to request it from the loan holder. Only the loan holder has the authority to grant forbearance. In the forbearance process, the National Service Trust merely verifies that you serve in an approved national service position. If the loans are in default, the loan holder is not required to place the loans in

forbearance. There may be ways, however, to bring a loan out of default to make it eligible for forbearance. Contact your lender for further information.

### **Process for Requesting Forbearance**

You, as the borrower, must request any of the various types of postponements for qualified student loans. This process is automated through [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov). You can create a forbearance request under "My Education Award" on your [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) homepage. Only the loan forbearance form accessible electronically through your [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) account may be used for a forbearance based on your service.

Occasionally, a loan company may ask for additional information or require you to complete one of its forms. After filling out the borrower's portion of a forbearance request form, you should submit it to the Trust Office (the address is listed at the end of this chapter) for verification that you serve in an approved national service position. Be sure to make a copy for your records.

Be sure to include the loan holder's name and address and your service dates. Once the Trust receives the request (through [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) or the lender's form), it certifies that you participate in AmeriCorps VISTA and then forwards the documents to the loan holder. You can track the status of your request for forbearance and see when it has been processed. Normally, the loan holder notifies you when forbearance has been granted. If you have not heard from the loan company within three weeks from the time you submitted or mailed the form to the Trust, you should call the loan holder (most have toll-free lines) to make sure the paperwork was received and forbearance was granted.

### **Perkins Loans, State Agency Loans, and Forbearances**

The Segal AmeriCorps Education Award can be used for two types of qualified student loans not currently covered by the federal laws requiring loan holders to approve forbearance based on national service. There is currently no federal requirement for a loan company to grant forbearance for federal Perkins Loans or loans issued to a member by a state agency.

If a member finds that a holder of either of these two types of loans will not grant forbearance based on national service, there may be other postponement options available. For example, the member may be eligible for a deferment or forbearance based on economic hardship during the service period. Members should contact their loan holders if they wish to learn about other types of postponements for which they may be eligible.

Because both the Perkins Loans and loans issued by a state agency are included in the National Service Trust's legal definition of qualified student loan, alumni can use their education awards to make payments against them.

## **PAYMENT OF ACCRUED INTEREST**

You are eligible to have the National Service Trust pay all or a portion of the interest



that accumulates on your qualified student loans while you are earning your education award. These payments are made in addition to the education award and they are not deducted from your education award balance. These interest payments, however, are shown on your account statement. To be eligible to have accrued interest paid, the loan must have been in forbearance or deferment during the

service period and the member must have successfully completed a term of service.

The Trust cannot pay for interest that accrued outside a member's service period. It also cannot pay interest if the member did not earn an education award. Members who elect the stipend are not eligible for this interest payment.

Generally, the Trust pays all interest for full-time members who complete their term of service and a portion of the interest for members who had to end their service early for compelling reasons and have received a prorated award. The portion that the Trust pays is based on a formula contained in the regulations that govern the National Service Trust.

### **Process for Getting Interest Paid**

The Trust pays the interest when it has both of the following:

- Verification from AmeriCorps staff via the Future Plans Form that the member has completed service and is eligible for an education award
- An AmeriCorps Interest Accrual Request Form, accurately completed by the loan holder, that shows the total amount of interest accrued during the member's term of service

You must initiate the process to have your interest paid in your [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) account. The Trust cannot make any payments on your behalf until AmeriCorps staff verifies on your Future Plans Form that you have completed service. Once verification occurs, a Trust account is automatically established for you. These actions may occur only after your completion of service. You need to make sure that your loan holder informs the Trust of the total amount of interest that accrued during your service period. To have this interest information sent to the Trust, you should create an Interest Accrual Request in your [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) account, under "My Education Award." After you certify and submit the form, it will be forwarded to your loan holder(s). Each loan holder completes the lender portion of the form and forwards it to the National Service Trust. You can track the status of your request and see when a payment has been made.

## **TAX IMPLICATIONS**

### **FEDERAL TAX**

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has determined that payments from an education award and interest payments made on behalf of a member during a particular calendar year are considered taxable income in that year. These payments are reported to the Internal Revenue Service if they total at least \$600 in the year. By January 31, the Trust will send you an IRS Form 1099-MISC that states the amount reported to the Internal Revenue Service. This amount must be included as income on your tax return. The Trust does not withhold any amount from the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. Payments not processed by the Trust within a given calendar year are not included on your Form 1099-MISC even though your payment request was submitted before the end of the year.

### **TAX CREDITS**

As a result of the Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997, many members who use their Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards may obtain substantial relief from federal taxes. This relief comes in the form of the Hope Scholarship Credit and the Lifetime Learning Credit, as well as in the form of a deduction for certain interest payments on qualified student loans. These benefits are generally available to people who are paying qualified tuition and related expenses to an eligible institution of higher education either for themselves or for members of their families.

## CONTACTING THE NATIONAL SERVICE TRUST

The National Service Hotline can answer many questions about AmeriCorps education benefits. The National Service Hotline has a toll-free number through which customer service representatives answer general award questions or provide detailed information about specific awards or payments. Representatives also provide assistance for using the My AmeriCorps Online Payment System. Customer service representatives are available Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. (Eastern Standard Time) during January and May through September. The hours of operation from February through April and October through December are Monday through Thursday from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.; the Hotline is closed on Friday during these months. The toll-free telephone number is 800-942-2677. Questions may also be submitted at the National Service Hotline's [Ask a Question](#) page, or to:

National Service Trust  
AmeriCorps  
250 E St., SW  
Washington, DC 20525

## GRADUATE RECORD EXAMINATION FEE REDUCTION PROGRAM

The Educational Testing Service, which administers the GRE (Graduate Record Examination), makes available to colleges and universities a limited supply of [GRE Fee Reduction Certificates](#). The decision to issue the Fee Reduction Certification is up to the college or university to which you apply. To apply for a GRE Fee Reduction Certificate, contact the financial aid office of the educational institution that interests you to see if you qualify. Be sure to tell them about your experience serving as an AmeriCorps member. To learn more about the GRE Fee Reduction Program, visit [http://www.ets.org/gre/revised\\_general/about/fees/reductions](http://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/fees/reductions)

## EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS AT A GLANCE

If you earn...	Educational Benefit	When Benefit is Available	How to Apply
<b>End-of-Service Stipend</b> (Only)	Percentage of Federal Perkins Loans cancelled	After you complete service	<b>Contact the Student Aid Information Center at 800-433-</b>

for those not choosing the AmeriCorps Education Award)	Repayment of federal student loans is deferred	During service	<b>3243 or visit: <a href="http://www.studentaid.ed.gov">www.studentaid.ed.gov</a></b>  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Complete a deferment form obtained from your loan holder and follow the guidance specific to your loan type.</li> <li>2. If your deferment form requires signed verification, send form to: Corporation for National and Community Service 250 E Street SW Suite 4300, Mailroom Washington, DC 20525 Attn: VMSU</li> <li>3. VISTA Member Support Unit will certify the form and send to lender.</li> </ol>
	Accrued interest on deferred loans paid by U.S. Department of Education	During service	
<b>AmeriCorps Education Award</b> (Only for those not choosing the end-of-service stipend)	Members receive an award equal to the amount of the Pell Grant to repay eligible student loans and pay future educational expenses	After you complete service	Complete the Future Plans Form in your <a href="http://my.americorps.gov">my.americorps.gov</a> account 45 days before ending service
	All or a portion of accrued interest on postponed student loans paid by National Service Trust	After you complete service	Access your online education award account via <a href="http://my.americorps.gov">my.americorps.gov</a> and submit request electronically to your lender
	Postponement of federal student loans on the basis of "national service"	During service	Complete online form at <a href="http://my.americorps.gov">my.americorps.gov</a>  <b>or</b>  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Complete paper copy of "Federal Education Loan Forbearance Request" from the lender</li> <li>2. Return it to: National Service Trust Office</li> </ol>

			<p>Corporation for National Service  250 E St., SW  Washington, DC 20525</p> <p>3. Trust verifies your enrollment in the Trust, certifies the form, and sends it to the lender</p>
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## Chapter 7: Travel & Transportation Support

### TRAVEL & TRANSPORTATION SUPPORT

The AmeriCorps VISTA program provides support for travel directly related to the service of candidates and members (excluding daily commuting). This travel, referred to as “official travel,” must be approved in advance by the AmeriCorps VISTA program and includes:

- Travel to and from AmeriCorps-sponsored training events and conferences
- Travel to and from the service site, prior to and after service, for members and leaders relocating more than 50 miles from their homes
- Emergency travel (see [Chapter 9](#): Leave Benefits – Emergency Leave)

The AmeriCorps VISTA program covers expenses for official travel within the continental United States, as well as for official travel by those who serve in or whose home of record is in Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. All members authorized by AmeriCorps to travel will be reimbursed for travel expenses as described in this chapter. All travel payments are subject to collection to offset debts owed to the federal government (see [Chapter 5](#)).

### RELOCATION TRAVEL

Candidates who are relocating more than 50 miles from their home of record to their service site to serve may be entitled to a Relocation Travel Allowance.

## **RELOCATION TRAVEL ALLOWANCE**

Candidates approved to relocate to serve are eligible for a Relocation Travel Allowance, which is intended to help offset the cost of relocating from the home of record to the service site. The rate, established by the VISTA program, is based on the mileage between the ZIP code of the home of record and the ZIP code of the service site. Effective January 1, 2019, the rate is \$0.40 per mile.

## **REQUESTING APPROVAL FOR RELOCATION TRAVEL**

Candidates who are relocating more than 50 miles from their home of record to their service site are deemed eligible for relocation benefits by the Corporation Field Office prior to the start of service. If you are unsure if you have been approved for relocation benefits, please contact the VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU). The VMSU reviews all relocation travel requests for final approval. Candidates will be contacted by the VMSU with a form to complete that the candidate will confirm in writing that they have relocated for service or will be doing so within 45 days. If an individual does not relocate at the start of their service term, they may be eligible for a relocation travel allowance if they relocate during their service term.

The VMSU will create and approve a travel request profile on behalf of the candidate in the My AmeriCorps portal. The candidate will be approved to receive a relocation travel allowance calculated from their home of record to their service site.

Candidates will receive an email notification from the VMSU prior to the service start date with the approved amount you will receive for the relocation travel allowance. Candidates who do not receive an approval email have not been approved for relocation benefits or were not indicated as being eligible for relocation benefits.

## **MODES OF TRAVEL FOR RELOCATION**

If you are relocating to serve, you arrange your own relocation travel. How you get there is up to you – air, rail, bus, or personal vehicle – but you must make sure that you are present at your site on your service start date. The VISTA Member Support Unit informs you of the reimbursement amount via email.

## **REQUESTING REIMBURSEMENT FOR TRAVEL**

To receive reimbursement for relocation, you must return the required relocation form within the first week of service.

Your travel must be approved in advance by the AmeriCorps VISTA program in order to receive reimbursement.

Payment is made through electronic deposit to your bank account identified in [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov). Reimbursement may take up to ten weeks due to administrative processing.

## **TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENT AT END OF SERVICE**

Candidates who relocated to serve are eligible to receive a Close of Service Travel Allowance at the end of service. The allowance is intended to offset the cost of returning home from the service site. The rate, established by the AmeriCorps VISTA program, is based on the mileage between the site and the approved home of record. Effective January 1, 2019, the rate is \$0.40 per mile.



The approved home of record is the location approved at the start of service and may not be redefined without written authorization of the director of the VISTA Member Support Unit. Home of record may not be altered after the tenth (10th) month of service.

You must submit the required allowance form to collect the close of service Relocation Travel Allowance. Your reimbursement voucher will be made available to you via your member homepage in [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) no later than fifteen days prior to the end of your service term. Payment will be deposited into your bank account through direct deposit. This may take up to ten weeks due to administrative processing. (Refer to [Chapter 12, Close of Service Travel Assistance](#), for more information about end-of-service travel payment.)

### **Additional Year of Service**

If you serve an additional year at the same project site location, you will not be reimbursed for travel to your home of record until the end of your final year of

service, regardless of whether or not there is a break in service. If you serve an additional year at a new project site location, with no break in service, and must relocate more than 50 miles to the new site location, you will only be reimbursed for travel between your previous service site and your new service site.

Furthermore, if you serve at a different project or site location and have a break in service, you may be eligible to be reimbursed to travel to your home or record between service terms depending on the length of time between your previous and new service term.

Please see the sections "Breaks in Service" and "Additional AmeriCorps VISTA Service" in [Chapter 12](#) for more details.

## **SERVICE-RELATED TRANSPORTATION**

For member to perform his or her project assignment effectively, transportation may be essential. The sponsoring organization is responsible for determining the service-related transportation needs of members. These needs are based on activities identified in your VISTA Assignment Description and do not include daily commute or other non-service trips.

### **PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION FOR SERVICE-RELATED TRAVEL**

The sponsor reimburses the member for authorized, service-related public transportation expenses.

### **VEHICLES OWNED OR LEASED BY SPONSORING ORGANIZATIONS FOR SERVICE-RELATED TRAVEL**

When public transportation is not available or adequate, the sponsoring organization is responsible for providing or supporting vehicles used by members in the performance of their assignments. Vehicles owned by or leased to a sponsoring organization may be authorized for service-related transportation, if necessary, to carry out your project assignment. You are responsible for complying with the sponsoring organization's rules, in addition to complying with all applicable VISTA requirements, when you operate a sponsor's vehicle.

While performing your assigned duties you may not transport passengers other than those determined by the supervisory authority to be directly related to and within the

scope of your official responsibilities. There will be a presumption that you are not in the performance of official responsibilities when transporting unauthorized persons.

In the event it is determined that you were performing official activities while transporting unauthorized passengers, the passengers will not be covered by the government for personal injury, and you may be personally liable for injury to the passengers and subject to appropriate administrative action.

### **PRIVATELY OWNED VEHICLES FOR SERVICE-RELATED TRAVEL**

If a privately owned vehicle is necessary to carry out your assigned duties, the sponsoring organization should reimburse members for authorized, service-related mileage at the rate established by the sponsoring organization's reimbursement policy.

### **LICENSING AND INSURANCE**

Sponsoring organizations and members are responsible for complying with all laws concerning vehicle registration, operator licensing, and insurance on any vehicles used officially or unofficially by members in the state and locality where they serve and reside. You are covered by the Federal Tort Claims Act (see [Chapter 15](#)) for third-party liability (e.g., damage or injury to others only while in the performance of official duties) and by the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (see [Chapter 15](#)) for personal injury. AmeriCorps is not responsible, however, for any damage to your own vehicle; thus, it is essential that you maintain adequate insurance on your own vehicle.

### **ACCIDENTS WHILE DRIVING A VEHICLE**

If an accident occurs while you are driving a vehicle within the scope of your duties and other people sustain injuries or property damages because of the accident in which you were the driver, the exclusive remedy for those persons is under the Federal Tort Claims Act. If you are injured, you may be eligible to receive benefits to cover medical expenses under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act, also known as the Federal Worker's Compensation Act (see [Chapter 8](#) for claims procedures). AmeriCorps is not responsible, however, for any damage to your own vehicle. (See [Chapter 15](#) for more information about the Federal Tort Claims Act and the Federal Employees' Compensation Act.)

If an accident occurs, you must immediately summon the local police, comply with local requirements, and within two days of the accident make sure the following actions are taken:

- You must complete Sections I-IX of [Form SF-91, Operator's Report of Motor Vehicle Accident](https://www.gsa.gov/forms-library/motor-vehicle-accident-report) available here: <https://www.gsa.gov/forms-library/motor-vehicle-accident-report>. Your supervisor must complete Section X, Blocks 71-82c. Sections XI-XIII are completed only if bodily injury and/or fatality occur, and/or damages exceed \$500.
- Where appropriate, you must obtain the names and addresses of witnesses and, if possible, obtain a completed [Form SF-94, Statement of Witness](https://www.gsa.gov/forms-library/statement-witness), from each witness available here: <https://www.gsa.gov/forms-library/statement-witness>. When there are no witnesses and, therefore, an SF-94 cannot be prepared, a statement to this effect must be included in the operator's report (SF-91) and certified by the supervisor.
- Make sure your supervisor prepares notes for the files in case you file a claim under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (see [Chapter 8](#)) after you complete service.
- You must log into [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) and complete the Use of Vehicle or Public Transportation V-81 Form. The sponsoring organization or supervisor and AmeriCorps Field Office approve the V-81 form (AmeriCorps VISTA Use of Vehicles and Public Transportation).

In all instances where state laws require an official police report based on the extent of damages, a copy of such report must be included along with the other forms mentioned previously. In all cases involving damage to property (regardless of how minor), an official police report, if available, must be included and attached to the Form SF-91. In any accident in which personal injury has occurred, you must notify your AmeriCorps Field Office within 24 hours. AmeriCorps Field office contact information is available here: <https://americorps.gov/contact/region-offices>

An original and one copy of all reports noted above, as well as the police report if appropriate, must be submitted to the AmeriCorps Field Office who will forward the original report(s) to AmeriCorps' Office of General Counsel. The member, sponsoring organization, and AmeriCorps Field Office should retain copies of all submitted forms for their records.

All members and sponsoring organizations are prohibited from making any representations concerning the ultimate liability of the federal government on a particular claim to other parties. AmeriCorps' Office of General Counsel and, where applicable, the Department of Justice, will make the final determination on whether an

accident occurred within the scope of your project-related activities and the extent of the government's liability. (Travel to and from your home of record to the project site is not covered under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act.)

Members and sponsoring organizations are expected to cooperate fully with AmeriCorps' Office of General Counsel in obtaining necessary evidence and materials, and with the Department of Justice or U.S. Attorney in the event legal action is taken in connection with the accident. If requested, sponsoring organizations, supervisors, and members are authorized to provide third parties with copies of Form SF-95, Claim for Damage, Injury, or Death (available here: <https://www.nationalservice.gov/documents/amerikorps-vista/2013/claim-damage-injury-or-death-sf-95>) and to advise that the claim must be submitted to the AmeriCorps Field Office that has authority over the member.

If a civil action is brought in a local court against you or the sponsoring organization as a result of an accident or if you are asked or ordered to testify or be deposed, you must immediately notify the AmeriCorps Field Office, which will notify the Office of General Counsel.

AmeriCorps is not responsible for any indemnification or contribution to the sponsoring organization for any damages sustained by the sponsoring organization.

### **TRAVEL FORMS AT A GLANCE\***

Form	Use	Required Approvals	Notes
<b>"Training and Relocation Travel" Travel Request Profile – Available in <a href="http://my.americorps.gov">my.americorps.gov</a></b>	Created by the VMSU on behalf of members who relocate more than 50 miles from their home of record to serve. Calculated based on mileage from home of record to service site.	<b>VISTA Member Support Unit – you must receive written approval arranging relocation travel</b>	If the Home of Record or Project Site Address are listed incorrectly on your Travel Request Profile, please contact the VMSU.
<b>"Relocation Travel Only" Travel Request Profile</b>	Created by the VMSU on behalf of members who are reinstating or reenrolling into a new service term and will be relocating more than 50 miles from their current project site	<b>VISTA Member Support Unit – you must receive written</b>	If the Home of Record or Project Site Address are listed incorrectly on your Travel Request

	or home of record to serve at a new project site location. Calculated based on mileage from previous project site to new project site OR from home of record to new project site. Required for candidates who relocate more than 50 miles from their home of record to serve. Documents the preferred dates and mode(s) of travel.	<b>approval in order to receive the relocation travel allowance.</b>	Profile, please contact the VMSU.
<b>“Ending Service” Travel Request Profile – Available in <a href="http://my.americorps.gov">my.americorps.gov</a></b>	Created by the VMSU on behalf of members who relocated to serve at the beginning of service. Calculated based on mileage from service site to home of record (as established at the beginning of service)	<b>VISTA Member Support Unit</b>	Request to change home of record must be submitted to the VMSU Director for approval prior to the end of the member’s tenth month of service.
<b>Use of Vehicles or Public Transportation Form (V-81) – Available in <a href="http://my.americorps.gov">my.americorps.gov</a></b>	Required for members involved in an accident while operating a vehicle for service-related purposes.	<b>Sponsor and Field Office – approval process is automated</b>	Form V-81 is not used for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commuting purposes</li> <li>• Personal travel</li> <li>• Relocation travel</li> <li>• General operation of a vehicle for service-related purposes (i.e., when no accident occurs)</li> </ul>

\* Check with your sponsoring organization for deadlines.

## Chapter 8: Healthcare Benefit Support

### HEALTHCARE BENEFIT OVERVIEW

As an AmeriCorps VISTA member, you are eligible for certain health benefits through AmeriCorps VISTA for the duration of your service term.

All members are eligible to participate in one of these Healthcare Benefit options:

1. AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance – members who have health care coverage can get reimbursed for certain out-of-pocket expenses
2. AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan – members who do not have health care coverage can enroll in this basic plan at no cost

Eligibility and benefit information about each option is available online at [americorpsvista.imglobal.com](http://americorpsvista.imglobal.com). A general description of each option is below.

## **ENROLLMENT**

At the start of your VISTA term of service, you will need to complete a [Member Enrollment Form](#) to indicate which benefit option you would like to receive. The form may be completed by creating a MyIMGVISTA Account at [americorpsvista.imglobal.com](http://americorpsvista.imglobal.com) or by downloading the [Member Enrollment Form](#) and sending to IMG, the plan administrator.

For details about the AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan and the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance, please visit: [americorpsvista.imglobal.com](http://americorpsvista.imglobal.com).

Members starting or ending service are eligible for a 60 day special enrollment period through the Health Insurance Marketplace at [healthcare.gov](http://healthcare.gov) because it is a specific “qualifying change.” It is recommended that members wishing to change healthcare coverage should take action within 30 days of ending service to avoid a lapse in coverage. Information about “qualifying changes” can be found at <https://www.healthcare.gov/coverage-outside-open-enrollment/special-enrollment-period> under “More qualifying changes.”

## **HEALTHCARE BENEFIT ADMINISTRATION**

International Medical Group (IMG) is the administrator of the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Benefit Program and is available as a resource to you. For specific details about the benefit program, please visit [americorpsvista.imglobal.com](http://americorpsvista.imglobal.com) or contact IMG at:

### **International Medical Group**

P.O. Box 550

Farmington Hills, MI 48332-0550

Telephone: 855-851-2974 (toll-free) or 317-833-1711

Fax: 855-851-2971

Email: [vistacare@imglobal.com](mailto:vistacare@imglobal.com)

## HEALTHCARE BENEFIT COVERAGE

All members are eligible to participate in one of the following benefits:

1. **AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance** – members who have health care coverage can get reimbursed for certain out-of-pocket expenses
2. **AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Benefit Plan** – members who do not have health care coverage can enroll in this basic plan at no cost

**The AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance** is a supplemental health care reimbursement program that covers out-of-pocket costs associated with your healthcare coverage. Out-of-pocket expenses may include: your annual deductible, coinsurance, copayments, and other charges for qualified medical, dental, and vision care expenses. The Healthcare Allowance will help offset these expenses up to the out-of-pocket maximum under the ACA. The Healthcare Allowance does not cover costs associated with premium payments (that is, the cost of buying insurance) or charges associated with any other individual covered under your primary health care plan or policy.

Examples of health care options you may have that would make the Healthcare Allowance beneficial for you include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Family healthcare benefit – If you are 26 or younger and on a parent’s plan, or married and covered by a spouse’s plan
- Healthcare benefit purchased through the Health Insurance Marketplace – You can shop for coverage and find out if you qualify for lower costs by visiting the Health Insurance Marketplace at [www.healthcare.gov](http://www.healthcare.gov)
- Medicaid, Medicare, or military health care benefits
- Coverage under a separate government-sponsored program or act, such as benefits available to individuals in the U.S. territories or who belong to a federally recognized tribe

If you choose to enroll in the Healthcare Allowance, please be prepared to provide your primary healthcare coverage information including effective date of your primary healthcare coverage. If you do not yet have other health coverage but plan to, you may wait to enroll in the Healthcare Allowance until you have secured health care coverage and are able to provide the healthcare coverage’s information.

**The AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan** is a basic health benefit plan for members who do not have health coverage during their term of service. It is also available for those who have applied for other coverage and are waiting for that

coverage to take effect. A Member Enrollment Form will be required to enroll in the plan.

The plan is available to members at no cost and covers most routine services, limited preventive care visits (e.g., an annual ob-gyn visit for women), medical emergencies, surgical and hospitalization expenses, certain prescription drug costs, routine dental care, and limited vision services. Although an excellent support for many VISTAs, the plan does not cover pre-existing conditions nor does it cover dependents, including your spouse.

**For details on eligibility and coverage for each plan, please visit: [americorpsvista.imglobal.com](https://americorpsvista.imglobal.com)**

### **SUBROGATION FOR MEDICAL CARE EXPENSES**

If you are in a car or other accident while serving as a member, AmeriCorps may initially pay for your medical care. If that happens, and you then collect from the insurance company of the person who was at fault (or from your insurance company if the person at fault has no coverage), AmeriCorps has the right to recover from you the cost of whatever medical care it paid for. This situation is known as subrogation. In other words, if you are injured or become ill through the fault of another person, and either person's insurance company, or your insurance company, settles with you, AmeriCorps has the right to recover from you the cost of any health care it has paid, regardless of the reason for the settlement.

### **ACCESS TO TELEHEALTH**

In addition to their elected health benefit, many members can access telehealth, sometimes called virtual care, at no cost.

Telehealth allows members to consult with board certified physicians, psychologists, social workers, and professional counselors via phone or video chat, at no cost to the member. Telehealth coverage and availability may vary by state. For more information and to access this benefit, please visit: <https://americorpsvista.imglobal.com/my-benefits/connect-with-a-telehealth-provider>.

## **FEDERAL EMPLOYEES' COMPENSATION ACT**

Under section 415(b) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended (42 U.S.C., § 5055), AmeriCorps VISTA members are considered employees of the federal government for purposes of coverage under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA), which is administered by the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) of the U.S. Department of Labor. The Department of Labor's OWCP office is solely responsible for the adjudication of FECA claims. This means that members are eligible for certain benefits in certain situations, and eligibility is determined by OWCP, not AmeriCorps.

### **BENEFITS**

FECA provides compensation benefits for an illness or injury if it is judged by OWCP to be service-related (i.e., caused or aggravated by the performance of a member's assignment). Coverage by FECA begins for members after they are sworn in to the AmeriCorps VISTA program. You are not covered by FECA, however, if the injury or disability results from your own misconduct, intoxication, or willful intent to bring about injury or death to yourself or others.

Benefits approved under FECA begin after termination from service and include payment for continuing medical care and compensation for wage loss and permanent impairment of certain members or functions of the body in the event of a service-related disability. FECA also contains provisions for payment of certain death benefits, such as shipment of the body, funeral and burial costs, and survivor's benefits if the member's death results from an injury or illness sustained in the performance of official project duties.

### **CLAIMS PROCEDURES**

If you are injured or experience an emergency illness related to your assignment, the project supervisor and the AmeriCorps Field Office must be notified immediately. To protect your right to apply to OWCP for compensation, you need to complete the form (CA-1 or CA-2).

For faster and more accurate processing, please complete and submit the electronic version of the forms:

- The [CA-1 form](https://www.dol.gov/owcp/regs/compliance/ca-1.pdf), Notice of Traumatic Injury, should be filed when an accident or physical injury occurs during performance of duties. The CA-1 form is available here: <https://www.dol.gov/owcp/regs/compliance/ca-1.pdf>.
- The [CA-2 form](https://www.dol.gov/owcp/regs/compliance/ca-2.pdf), Notice of Occupational Disease or Illness, should be filed when a disease or illness is suspected of being caused by job performance. The CA-2 form is available here: <https://www.dol.gov/owcp/regs/compliance/ca-2.pdf>.

Although an illness or injury may not appear to be serious enough to result in compensation eligibility, you should complete the claim forms to protect your rights in case future complications develop. You have up to three years from the date of injury or up to three years from the date you realize your assignment caused an injury to request your completed form be filed with OWCP.

Submit all FECA claims and relevant material to your AmeriCorps Field Office. The AmeriCorps Field Office will:

- Advise and assist individual claimants regarding the preparation, submission, and follow-up of their respective FECA claims
- Provide appropriate assistance in compiling and submitting all pertinent information relating to FECA claims

Parts of these forms require completion by the sponsoring organization. Notify your AmeriCorps Field Office if you need assistance in receiving these forms back from your former sponsoring organization.

## **APPEAL PROCEDURE**

You may petition any claim rejected by OWCP by following the appeal rights process outlined in the rejection notice you received by mail from OWCP, or in the OWCP information guide, *When Injured at Work*. This guide and other resources about claims under FECA are available on the Division of Federal Employees' Compensation Home Page at <http://www.dol.gov/owcp/dfec/regs/compliance/ca-11.htm>.

## **DEATH BENEFITS**

In the event of a member's death during service, the next of kin or designated beneficiary is entitled to the following:

- Coverage of expenses incurred at the place of death (ambulance service, transportation of the body, etc.)
- Funeral and burial benefits from either AmeriCorps (to a maximum of \$1,000) or from OWCP if the death is found to be service related
- Unpaid compensation or reimbursement owed to the member
- Any benefits available to spouse or dependents from OWCP if the death is determined to be assignment-related

## Chapter 9: Leave Benefits

### LEAVE BENEFITS AT A GLANCE

Below is a summary of leave benefits available during VISTA service. Review the chart and information below for additional requirements related to each leave type.

Leave type	Total Workdays	Conditions
<b>National holiday</b>	Only those observed by sponsor and/or subsite staff	
<b>Personal</b>	10 service days in a full year of service	Generally, leave in first 3 months or last month is limited to emergencies and family matters.  If you reenroll or extend your service with the same project without a break in service, you are entitled to any unused personal leave earned in the prior term of service.  Must be taken in accordance with sponsor and/or subsite policies.
<b>Personal in an extension of service</b>	1 service day per 30 additional days of service	If you extend service with the same project without a break in service, you are also entitled to any unused personal leave earned in the prior term or service.
<b>Medical</b>	10 service days in a full year of service	If you reenroll or extend service with the same project without a break in service, you are entitled

		to any unused medical leave earned in the prior term of service.  Must be taken in accordance with sponsor and/or subsite policies.
<b>Medical in an extension of service</b>	1 service day per 30 additional days of service	If you extend service with the same project without a break in service, you are also entitled to any unused medical leave earned in the prior term or service.
<b>Extended Medical Leave Benefits</b>	Must exhaust personal and medical first  5 service days in a full year of service	The AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager may approve an additional 5 service days for a total of 15 medical service days in a full year of service, in cases that require extended recuperation. These extended medical leave benefits are not to be used as parental leave (covered below).
<b>Parental Leave (birth/adoption)</b>	Must exhaust personal and medical leave first	The AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager may approve an additional 10 service days of leave, for a total of 30 service days, if required.
<b>Emergency</b>	5 service days in a full year of service	Sponsor may allow if a natural disaster requires leaving the site or an immediate family member becomes critically ill or dies. Sponsor must notify the AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager.
<b>Jury duty</b>	As necessary	
<b>Military reserve</b>	As required by the military	

## **NATIONAL HOLIDAYS**

Members enjoy the national holidays that are recognized by their sponsoring organization or sub-site and are given as time off to the rest of the organization's personnel. Members do not get excused leave for federal holidays that are not recognized by their sponsoring organization and/or sub-site. For example, if your organization does not give its staff a holiday for Veterans Day, you are expected to serve unless you request and receive approval for one day of personal leave. Additionally, if you want the day off for a religious observance, you should request a day of personal leave. Please contact your sponsoring organization to determine recognized holidays.

If your sponsoring organization provides its staff additional "floating holidays," "spring breaks," "summer recesses," etc., you are expected to continue to serve on your assignment unless authorized to take the time off as part of your personal leave. In such cases, an alternative service site for a limited duration may be considered if approved in advance by the supervisor and AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager. Review the Alternative Service Site section later in this chapter for approval requirements.

## **PERSONAL LEAVE**

You are entitled to 10 service days of personal leave during each full year of service. A service day is equivalent to the number of hours your sponsoring organization considers a typical full day of service. If you reenroll or extend service with the same project without a break in service, you are entitled to any unused personal leave earned in your prior term of service. Members who extend their period of service earn one day of personal leave for every 30 days of the extension.

You must request and receive approval in advance from the sponsoring organization/supervisor for all personal leave, specifying the dates of leave requested.

During personal leave, all regular member allowances are continued. AmeriCorps does not pay travel expenses for personal leave.

## **MEDICAL LEAVE**

Members are entitled to 10 service days of medical leave during each full year of service. If you reenroll or extend service with the same project without a break in service, you are entitled to any unused medical leave earned in your prior term of service. Members who extend their period of service earn one day of medical leave for every 30 days of the extension. A service day is equivalent to the number of hours your sponsoring organization considers a typical full day of work. Partial days of medical leave also may be granted to the member. All living allowances continue during medical leave periods.

You are required to request prior approval for medical leave, except for extenuating circumstances when you are physically unable to request prior approval, from the sponsoring organization or supervisor. You should also specify the hours or dates of leave requested.

The sponsoring organization or supervisor must notify the AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager immediately if it appears that you will not be able to resume project duties within the maximum medical leave period of 10 service days. The AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager may approve an extension of your medical leave for up to another five (5) service days in cases of extended recuperation and in which you are likely to return to the project within the approved leave period, or in the event of some delay in obtaining a prognosis of your medical condition within the approved leave period.

## **PARENTAL LEAVE**

Members are entitled to use a combination of medical and personal leave (20 service days) for parental leave. The AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager may approve up to an additional 10 service days for parental leave, for a total of up to 30 service days, if required. No additional leave beyond 30 service days may be granted.

## **EMERGENCY LEAVE**

The sponsoring organization may grant you up to five service days of emergency leave. During emergency leave, all allowances continue. Emergency leave is granted in two types of exigent situations. First, it may be granted if you serve in an area where a natural disaster occurs and requires you to leave the area temporarily. Second, emergency leave may be granted if an immediate family member (spouse, domestic partner, parent, sibling, child, grandparent, or guardian) becomes critically ill or dies. Additional time away from the project requires the approval of the AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager. Emergency leave does not count against your personal leave time.

If circumstances require you to take emergency leave, you should notify the sponsoring organization or supervisor at once and, if requested, provide the sponsoring organization or supervisor with some evidence of the emergency. If the sponsoring organization determines that an emergency exists, the sponsoring organization will inform the AmeriCorps Field Office.

If travel is required, AmeriCorps VISTA will pay for the fastest regularly scheduled means of transportation to and from the site of the emergency or to your home of record, provided the destination is in the United States or a U.S. territory. In exceptional circumstances, members may have to purchase their own tickets, which will be reimbursed at the lowest commercial bus or train fare available. In circumstances where air travel is the only option, tickets may be reimbursed at the lowest commercial air fare available. You will be reimbursed for actual travel

expenses (e.g., tolls, parking), but you will receive no additional allowances for your travel.

In the event that AmeriCorps cannot pay for or provide a prepaid ticket in advance of the approved emergency leave, the sponsoring organization should furnish the needed travel assistance. Such advances, however, should be authorized by the AmeriCorps Field Office.

## **JURY DUTY**

Members may be summoned for jury duty. Sponsoring organizations shall give members the necessary time away from project duties to comply with a jury duty summons or serve on a jury. You should provide a copy of the summons to your supervisor, and keep your supervisor apprised of your status while you need to be offsite to attend to your jury duty obligation. Allowances will be paid during the period of jury duty. Your time on jury duty is not counted against your personal leave, term of service, or education award.

If you are subpoenaed (for non-project-related purposes), however, you are required to use personal leave.

## **MILITARY RESERVE LEAVE**

If you enter AmeriCorps VISTA service before completing a military reserve obligation, you must change the location of your reserve unit if necessary. Members should try to minimize the disruption in service as a result of discharging responsibilities related to their reservist duties. If you are allowed to choose when to fulfill your annual two weeks of active duty requirement, you should choose a period that does not disrupt your service.

A member is granted military reserve leave to attend the monthly reserve training sessions and the two weeks of active duty training. Such leave does not count against a member's personal leave, term of service, end-of-service stipend, or education award. You should notify the sponsoring organization/supervisor before taking military reserve leave and upon returning from such leave. You may not receive time off for active duty or other reserve-related service beyond the two weeks and the monthly training activities usually required for reserve status. Any other reserve-related service does not apply to your AmeriCorps VISTA service time for purposes of the education award. The sponsoring organization/supervisor notifies the AmeriCorps Field Office of the exact dates of your military reserve leave.

For military service-responsibilities that are expected to last more than 30 continuous days, the member is considered for placement in Deferred Term status.

## **FAMILY MEDICAL LEAVE ACT**

The [Family Medical Leave Act \(FMLA\)](#) is a federal law that provides certain employees in the United States with up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave per year to care for a covered family member and up to 26 six weeks of unpaid leave per year to care for a [covered armed service member](#). The Serve America Act Amendments to the National Community Service Act of 1990 extended FMLA protections to certain members.

Members, including leaders, are eligible for FMLA leave, if they satisfy all four of these conditions:

1. Have successfully completed a full year (12 months) of service
2. Serve with the same sponsor for a subsequent term of service
3. Were assigned to the same sponsor for at least 1,250 hours (eight months) for the previous term of service
4. Serve with a sponsor that has 50 or more employees

Given these four parameters for FMLA eligibility, only a minority of members may be eligible for FMLA leave. To begin the FMLA request process, a member should contact their sponsor, who can then liaise with the AmeriCorps Field Office for next steps.

In the context of the AmeriCorps VISTA program, FMLA is a leave without pay status. A member who is eligible for and takes “FMLA leave” stays enrolled in the AmeriCorps VISTA program, continues to receive healthcare benefits, and stays assigned to a project while taking the leave, but does not receive a living allowance. Further, member benefits and allowances (childcare, accrual of the end-of-service award [i.e., Education Award or end-of-service stipend]) are suspended while on FMLA leave. The member’s position at the project where the member had been assigned remains available for when the member returns and cannot be abolished or given to someone else during the member's FMLA-approved absence. Upon return to the project, the member’s program benefits that were suspended during FMLA leave, including the living allowance, resume.

## **ALTERNATIVE SERVICE SITE**

Members might be approved to serve at an alternative service site for a limited duration of time if their primary service site is closed.

For instance, if your service site is closed due to a weather event, natural disaster, or if your sponsoring organization provides its staff with additional “floating holidays,” “spring breaks,” “summer recesses,” etc., you are expected to continue to serve unless authorized to take the time off as part of your personal or sick leave. However, in lieu of taking personal or sick leave, you may serve at an alternative service site, for a limited duration, if approved in advance by the supervisor and AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager.

Your service plan should spell out the assignments expected of you during these periods. If it does not, consult with your supervisor.

# **Chapter 10: AmeriCorps VISTA Leaders**

## **AMERICORPS VISTA LEADERS**

Just as members work to expand and build the capacity of community projects, leaders work to expand and build the capacity of individual members and their respective service sites. Leaders have demonstrated leadership skills and qualities during their initial term(s) of service and have accepted a new level of responsibility.

## **ROLE OF AMERICORPS VISTA LEADERS**

The aim of a leader is to expand and build the capacity of the members (and summer associates) they lead, in coordination with the projects in which they serve. The aim of a leader is to expand and build the capacity of the members (and summer associates) they lead, in coordination with the projects in which they serve. Leaders provide support and coordination for members to increase the project's impact. Leaders are not, and do not function as, AmeriCorps employees or employees of the sponsoring organization. Leaders are not permitted to perform staffing, administrative or supervisory functions for their sponsoring organizations. Hence, they do not supervise other members, the sponsoring organization staff, or community volunteers. Leaders do not replace the supervisor or any other sponsoring organization staff.

Leaders are assigned by AmeriCorps to projects or regions to assist sponsoring organizations in achieving program objectives and developing new project activities and sources of community support. Leaders set an example of leadership for members, ensure positive relations, facilitate idea-sharing, and mediate issues with the community, project, supervisors, and members. Leaders also play a support role in recruiting, mentoring, and coordinating members.

Leaders have successfully completed at least one year of AmeriCorps VISTA service, or one full term of full-time service (serving 1,700 hours or more) with either AmeriCorps State and National or AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), or at least one traditional term of Peace Corps service. Leaders must also demonstrate exemplary skills and leadership in community service. Leaders have demonstrated leadership ability to work constructively with community volunteers, supervisors, sponsoring organizations, and the low-income community.

A member is not entitled to leader assignment for simply having satisfactorily completed a previous service assignment. It is up to the AmeriCorps Field Office to select which projects may have leaders, to determine the number of leaders that may serve at designated projects, and to select those who will serve as leaders.

If circumstances warrant, a leader may be removed from the position and duties of a leader by AmeriCorps. The leader regulations, Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 2556, detail the qualifications necessary to become a leader, the selection procedure, and roles of leaders. Moreover, leaders are subject to the same requirements for proper conduct and satisfactory performance as members. Accordingly, like members, leaders are subject to the Early Termination for cause proceedings, set forth in AmeriCorps VISTA Early Termination regulations, Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 2556, Subpart E.

## **LEADER ORIENTATION**

Leaders participate in a three-and-a-half-day Leader Orientation designed to provide the knowledge and skills to help recruit, coach, and coordinate teams of members. Through training and hands-on experiences, leaders gain transferable skills in communication, decision-making, conflict resolution and coaching, facilitation, and recruiting.

As a leader, you should complete the VISTA Leader Orientation on the Campus at the beginning of your term of service.

VISTA Leader Orientation introduces you to your new role and equips you with a set of skills to help support members and ensure that their projects are sustainable. The goals of orientation are to:

- Communicate the roles and responsibilities of leaders
- Equip leaders with a set of leadership skills they can apply in their daily work
- Establish a learning community among leaders that will continue throughout their term of service
- Train leaders to be effective recruiters for AmeriCorps VISTA
- Educate leaders about the tools and resources available to them to support their roles and projects
- Help leaders to develop strategies and plan for effectively supporting their members and sustaining their projects
- Facilitate information sharing and collaboration among leaders working in similar issue areas
- Inspire leaders to complete a successful year of service

## **ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES FOR LEADERS**

AmeriCorps limits the number of years served in the AmeriCorps VISTA program to a maximum of five years. An individual who has served only one year of service as a member may serve as a leader for up to four years. A leader is not, however, guaranteed a second term as a leader. To receive approval for reenrollment as a leader, the leader's service performance must be outstanding, and the sponsoring organization and AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager must agree that it would benefit the project to reenroll the leader for another year of service.

## **BECOMING A VISTA LEADER**

The process for applying to serve as a leader is similar to the process for applying for a regular VISTA position or requesting re-enrollment or reinstatement. Eligible individuals complete an application using My AmeriCorps and submit it for an available leader position. Returned Peace Corps Volunteers will be asked to submit a Description of Service as part of their application package. Currently serving members who wish to re-enroll as a leader with the same sponsor complete the Future Plans Form and indicate re-enrollment.

## **TRANSITION FROM VISTA MEMBER TO LEADER**

In rare instances, there may be a member who is serving a second or subsequent term when a leader position at the sponsoring organization becomes vacant. In such cases, the sponsoring organization may recommend the promotion of the member to leader if the member has successfully completed a full term of service and demonstrates exemplary skills and leadership in community service. A sponsoring organization may not recommend the promotion of a member to leader midway through a member's first term of service. A member may become a leader at some point in their second term of service providing the member plans to serve 12 months as a leader.

## **LEADER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SPONSORING ORGANIZATIONS, SUPERVISORS, AND MEMBERS**

The leader has a distinct role within a sponsoring organization. Leaders coordinate and provide support to members, but they are not responsible for members. The project supervisor is directly responsible for the management of members.

The leader, however, is in a leadership role. At times, the leader may serve as a mediator, a facilitator, an adviser, or a trainer. The supervisor and leader should make sure members understand the leader's role and responsibilities.

The supervisor/sponsoring organization should not expect leaders to take on roles similar to those of members in addition to their leader roles and responsibilities. For example, if a leader coordinates a project that involves eight members who implement literacy programs at six different sites, the leader should not be expected to implement a literacy program.

## **REGIONAL AND PROJECT-BASED LEADERS**

Several states, because of their size and geography, have assigned leaders regionally. These leaders serve on a project and support not only their own project's members, but also members serving with other projects in a specified area. This type of assignment is acceptable for leaders as long as:

- Leaders are supervised by a single supervisor/sponsoring organization
- Project sponsors involved agree with the proposal
- Leaders do not operate in a AmeriCorps Field Office or sponsoring organization staff role

## **LEADER BENEFITS**

### **LIVING ALLOWANCE**

Leaders are eligible for an additional \$200 per month in their living allowance, effective on the date of their leader assignment. If, however, the \$200-per-month increase raises the living allowance above the federal or state minimum wage (whichever is higher), the leader must be given the option to:

- Keep the lower living allowance to retain public assistance payments
- Accept the allowance increase, with the understanding that it may jeopardize the eligibility for, or level of, public assistance or other governmental payments

See [VISTA Living Allowance Rates by County](#) for more information about the living allowance rate in the area where you serve. The living allowance is subject to federal tax. As a result, the amounts that appear in the chart are reflective of the rate before federal taxes are deducted.

### **HEALTH CARE**

All leaders receive the same health care benefits as members, in accordance with the provisions of the administrative contract between AmeriCorps and the benefits provider.

### **EDUCATION AWARD**

Leaders who have not already received two Segal AmeriCorps Education Award enrollments may opt for the education award. Leaders who opt for an education award cannot also receive an end-of-service stipend.

### **END-OF-SERVICE STIPEND**

Leaders who do not choose the education award receive an end-of-service cash stipend upon completion of their full term of service as a leader. Leaders who elect to receive an end-of-service stipend cannot also receive an education award.

# Chapter 11: Summer Associates

## SUMMER ASSOCIATES



Summer associate members serve for intensive, short terms of service lasting eight, nine, or ten weeks. Unlike year-round members, summer associates can perform direct service activities without limitation. As a summer associate, you are required to abide by the same laws and regulations as other members (discussed in [Chapter 14](#)) and are afforded certain legal protections. Summer associates are eligible for limited benefits (discussed below in Benefits

and Support).

Summer associate activities, combined with ongoing VISTA programming, should result in:

- A credible effort to alleviate poverty, not simply make poverty more tolerable
- Outcomes that increase the project's direct impact on those being served

Specific member assignments may vary. For example, summer associates could:

- Recruit, train, and coordinate (but not select or directly supervise) community-based volunteers, including high school and college students and older adults
- Structure long-term ways for involving community members in project activities
- Generate materials, supplies, and space for the project
- Involve the private sector in the project
- Develop materials for year-round project activities
- Conduct community education, outreach, and awareness related to the project

## ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES FOR SUMMER ASSOCIATES

Service in the AmeriCorps VISTA program is limited to a maximum of five years. Members and summer associates may earn up to the aggregate value of two full education awards in a lifetime. Education awards earned as a summer associate count towards the aggregate value of two full education awards.

## **BENEFITS AND SUPPORT**

Summer associate benefits differ from those benefits offered to members and leaders.

Summer associates receive:

- A living allowance for the time served, which is equivalent to the amount received by full-time members serving in the same area
- Choice between a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or an end-of-service summer stipend. Only those summer associates who successfully complete their full term of service are eligible to receive the education award or end-of-service summer stipend.

Each summer associate completes the summer associates Benefit Election Form on their first day of service to elect the education award or the end-of-service summer stipend. Unlike other members, summer associates cannot change their end-of-service award option at any point during their service term.

The summer stipend is calculated based on the number of days a summer associate is scheduled to serve, multiplied by the daily accrual rate. For details regarding the accrual rate for the end-of-service stipend, visit Chapter 5. Federal income tax and Social Security/Medicare (FICA) deductions are withheld from the end-of-service stipend at the time of payment.

Summer associates do not receive:

- Health care benefits
- Childcare allowances
- Relocation allowances
- Non-Competitive Eligibility

## **LEAVE**

While neither personal nor sick leave is available to summer associates, three categories of leave that may be available to summer associates are discussed below. Please see the “Emergency Leave” section below for guidelines during absences.

## **Holidays**

Summer associates receive leave on federal holidays observed by their sponsor and/or sub-site. Summer associates should consult their sponsor to determine recognized holidays and service schedules.

## **Emergency Leave**

When an emergency or illness prevents a summer associate from serving, sponsors and AmeriCorps staff may assist the summer associate in meeting the required number of service days. AmeriCorps staff must balance summer associate support with project support, avoiding excessive leave while supporting the summer associate through the emergency or illness.

The guidelines within which sponsors and AmeriCorps staff may support summer associates in fulfilling their summer obligations are:

- Summer associates must report all absences to their site supervisor. The site supervisor will report the absence to the overall project supervisor. Unreported absence may be cause for early termination
- Supervisors may arrange for limited (1-2 days) absences that will be made up by serving extra hours or extra days
  - Supervisors should prioritize the completion of make-up hours
  - Make-up days cannot extend past the last day of the summer associate's service term
- Supervisors must report to the AmeriCorps Field Office a summer associate's absence beyond two days and/or requests for absences that will not be made up
  - AmeriCorps Field Office staff may allow up to five additional days of emergency leave for a death or critical illness in the immediate family, but this must be approved by the Senior Portfolio Manager in advance

## **Jury Duty**

Summer associates may be summoned for jury duty; if summoned or selected to serve on a jury, summer associates will continue to be enrolled in the AmeriCorps VISTA program and retain their summer associate status. If summoned for jury duty, you should provide a copy of the summons to your supervisor, and keep your supervisor apprised of your status while you need to be offsite to attend to your jury duty obligation. Allowances will be paid during the period of jury duty.

## WORKER’S COMPENSATION

Summer associates are eligible to be considered for Worker’s Compensation under the Federal Employee Compensation Act (FECA).

## INCOME DISREGARD

The Income Disregard provisions apply to any summer associate receiving government benefits.

## COMPLETION OF FUTURE PLANS FORM

Due to the shortened nature of the summer associate service term, the Future Plans Form is available the first day of service. Summer associates and sponsors may complete the Future Plans Form, but this is not a requirement for summer associates.

# Chapter 12: End of Service

## END OF SERVICE

Just as you spent time preparing to begin your term of service, it is equally important for you to prepare for the conclusion of service. Whatever you choose to do after your service, you should start planning at least three months before your end-of-service date. Make sure you complete all your paperwork well before your end-of-service date and inform your supervisor and sponsoring organization of your departure date, contact details, and any other information needed for you, the sponsoring organization, and the AmeriCorps Field Office to make your end of service as smooth as possible.

## END-OF-SERVICE CHECKLIST

Due Date	To Whom	Item or Activity
90 days before your end-of-service date	VMSU via the National Service Hotline 1-800-942-2677, <a href="mailto:VMSU@cns.gov">VMSU@cns.gov</a> , or <a href="https://americorps.gov/contact">https://americorps.gov/contact</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Submit any request to change your home of record (changes submitted after your 10th month of service, or less than 60 days prior to your end-of-service date will not be considered). All requests must be</li></ul>

		approved by the Director of <a href="#">VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU)</a>
By the last day of your 10th month	<a href="http://my.americorps.gov">my.americorps.gov</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Submit any requests to change your end-of-service benefit selection from Education Award to end-of-service cash stipend</li> </ul>
At least 60 days before your end-of-service date	<a href="http://my.americorps.gov">my.americorps.gov</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complete Part A of the AmeriCorps VISTA Member Future Plans or Early Termination Request Form (Future Plans Form)</li> </ul>
At least 45 days before your end-of-service date	<a href="http://my.americorps.gov">my.americorps.gov</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your supervisor will complete Part B—Performance Evaluation of the AmeriCorps VISTA Member Future Plans or Early Termination Request Form (Future Plans Form)</li> <li>Participate in exit interview and evaluation of your performance with your supervisor</li> </ul>
	<b>Member</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If you elected to receive the end-of-service stipend, you will receive approximately \$400 of your accrued stipend (minus federal income tax and FICA deductions) in your second to last living allowance payment. The remaining balance is disbursed with your last living allowance payment.</li> </ul>
Within two weeks after completion of service (if not sooner)	<a href="#">VISTA Member Support Unit</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If you relocated to serve, submit your Close of Service Travel Reimbursement voucher. Payment of all travel reimbursements takes an average of 8-10 weeks from the</li> </ul>

		time the voucher is received at the VISTA Member Support Unit.
After completion of service	<a href="#">Web Resources for AmeriCorps VISTA Alums</a> <a href="http://americorps.gov">americorps.gov</a> <a href="#">VISTA Campus</a> <a href="#">LinkedIn</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generate your Verification of Service letter with information on your Non-Competitive Eligibility.</li> <li>• Learn more about Alumni benefits and the Employers of National Service initiative on <a href="https://www.americorps.gov/">https://www.americorps.gov/</a>.</li> <li>• Be sure to create a LinkedIn profile if you don't already have one and indicate your VISTA service. Also be sure to follow the official <a href="#">AmeriCorps VISTA LinkedIn page</a> for important career updates.</li> </ul>
	<a href="#">AmeriCorps Alums</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Join an AmeriCorps Alums chapter</li> <li>• Learn about discounts and matching education award scholarships</li> </ul>
	<b>Healthcare Marketplace: 888-318-2956</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you have insurance through the Marketplace and your income changes, you'll want to have your subsidy adjusted so you don't end up receiving too much subsidy (and then have to pay it back at tax time).</li> <li>• If you are currently in the VISTA Health Benefits Plan and want to purchase health insurance through the Marketplace, you have 60 days after close of service to do so. Refer to the VISTA Healthcare FAQs for more information on this special enrollment period.</li> </ul>

## **PREPARING FOR END-OF-SERVICE**

In order to have a successful end of service, please pay careful attention to the following items which are also outlined in the checklist above.

### **FUTURE PLANS FORM**

At least 60 days before your end-of-service date, you will need to complete the Future Plans or Early Termination Request Form (Future Plans Form). This form is on your member homepage in [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) under "Close-of-Service." It asks whether you wish to:

- Complete service as scheduled
- Extend my service for less than one year
  - Extensions are for no less than two weeks and no more than six months. Please note, the only end-of-service benefit available during an extension is the cash stipend.
- Reenroll for an additional year, which means you would continue service for one year at the same project or at a different project (re-enrollment)
- Terminate my service early

Your Future Plans Form becomes available on your [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) homepage 90 days before your end-of-service date. You must complete this form at least 60 days before your end-of-service date. The sponsoring organization or supervisor will then complete the evaluation section and submit the form to the AmeriCorps Field Office. You are entitled to review the evaluation section before it is sent to the AmeriCorps Field Office.



After you complete the Future Plans Form, your project supervisor will fill out the Performance Evaluation section. Follow up to make sure your supervisor has completed the form at least 45 days before your end-of-service date. Even members who choose to end service early must complete the Future Plans Form.

The AmeriCorps Field Office is responsible for determining whether you have successfully completed a term of service and are eligible for an education award. Once the Field Office indicates your eligibility by certifying the Future Plans Form

and the VISTA Member Support Unit processes the form, you will have access to an end-of-service award.

## **EVALUATION OF YOUR SERVICE**

The Future Plans Form requires the sponsoring organization to evaluate the performance of members approaching the end of their term of service or requesting a reenrollment or extension of service. You are entitled to review the evaluation section before it is sent to the AmeriCorps Field Office. During this time, you should also arrange an exit interview with your supervisor to summarize the work you have done and to talk through and agree with your evaluation. The exit interview is also an opportunity for you to give feedback, to discuss your future plans, and to finalize your arrangements for leaving. If you request to reenroll or extend, refer to the section on Additional AmeriCorps VISTA Service.

## **CLOSE OF SERVICE TRAVEL ASSISTANCE**

Candidates approved to relocate at the beginning of service are eligible to receive a Close of Service Travel Allowance when they finish service. The allowance is intended to help offset the cost of returning home from the service site. The Close of Service mileage is calculated using the same points of travel from the start of service. The rate, established by the AmeriCorps VISTA program, is based on the mileage between the ZIP code of the service site and the ZIP code of the approved home of record.

Travel allowance forms will be available no later than fifteen days prior to your end-of-service date. You will need to return the signed form to the VISTA Member Support Unit to receive your travel payment reimbursement. The signed forms should be sent to: [VMSUForms@cns.gov](mailto:VMSUForms@cns.gov)

The travel payment, made by direct deposit, will arrive eight weeks after the VISTA Member Support Unit receives your signed form. If you waived payment by direct deposit, a paper check will be mailed to the permanent address listed in your [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) account. Forms must be returned to the VMSU within two weeks after completion of service. If you fail to sign and return the Close of Service form within this time, payment may be delayed.

## **HOME OF RECORD**

The approved home of record is the location approved at the start of service. The home of record is either:

- The legal residence of your parent(s) or legal guardian if you had been residing with your parent(s) or legal guardian immediately prior to entering service, or if you were a full-time student whose permanent residence was with your parent(s) or legal guardian, or
- The residence established by you:
  1. While attending college immediately prior to entering service
  2. While employed immediately prior to entering service
  3. For purposes of voting or payment of state taxes

Modification of the home of record can be authorized prior to the tenth month of service, at the discretion of the Director of the VISTA Member Support Unit, if one of the following conditions exists:

- You designated the official home of record as the legal residence of a parent or legal guardian, and the parent or legal guardian has established a new residence (if the new residence is outside the United States, AmeriCorps will provide close of service assistance to the nearest port of exit).
- You designated the official home of record as the legal residence of a parent or legal guardian, and the parent or legal guardian has died. AmeriCorps will provide close of service assistance to the legal residence of the surviving parent or legal guardian, or next of kin (if the new residence is outside the United States, AmeriCorps will provide close of service assistance to the nearest port of exit).
- You have married and request close of service assistance to the home of record of your spouse.
- Close of service assistance to the new home of record is more economical to the United States government than the original home of record.

Requests to modify the home of record must be submitted in writing to the Director of the VISTA Member Support Unit via the National Service Hotline. Requests received after the end of the tenth month of service will not be considered.

## **BREAKS IN SERVICE**



If you serve an additional year at the same site, you will not be reimbursed for travel to your home of record until the end of your final year of service, regardless of whether or not there is a break in service. Please see Additional AmeriCorps VISTA Service for more details.

If you serve an additional year with a break in service of more than 14 days from the completion of your previous term of service, and must relocate 50 miles or more to a different project or site location, you may be eligible to be reimbursed to travel to your home of record between service terms.

If you serve an additional year within 14 days of completing your original term of service and relocate 50 miles or more to a different service site, you will receive a Relocation Travel Allowance for the mileage from your current site to your new site. See Chapter 7 for an explanation of the Relocation Travel Allowance. You will receive Close of Service Travel assistance at the end of the final year of service to your approved Home of Record.

## **END-OF-SERVICE STIPEND**

If you elected to receive the end-of-service stipend, you automatically receive the payment with your last two living allowance payments, provided you complete your term of service as scheduled and your end-of-service documents are submitted to the AmeriCorps Field Office. You will receive approximately \$400 of the end-of-service stipend with your second to last living allowance payment; the remaining balance is disbursed with your last living allowance payment. Federal income tax and Social Security (FICA) deductions are withheld from the stipend at the time of payment.

## **SEGAL AMERICORPS EDUCATION AWARD**

If you elected to receive the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, the award becomes available for your use after you successfully complete service. The value of the award is tied to the maximum Pell Grant level during the fiscal year in which you served. (See [Chapter 6](#) for detailed information on the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award.)

## **PROCESS FOR ACCESSING EDUCATION AWARD**

Your [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) account allows you the ability to make payments to lenders and higher education institutions. To access your award, click on the “My Education Award” link in your [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) account.

The Segal AmeriCorps Education Award must be used within seven years of the date you finish your service, unless you apply for and receive an extension prior to the end of your seventh year in accordance with 45 CFR §2526.40(b). If you have questions about your education award, you should contact the National Service Hotline at 800-942-2677, or [visit the AmeriCorps Hotline website](#), click on the "Ask a Question" tab, complete the help request form, and submit.

## **ADDITIONAL AMERICORPS VISTA SERVICE**

At the discretion of AmeriCorps, you may be afforded the opportunity to serve in the AmeriCorps VISTA program beyond the initial year of enrollment.

Additional service is predicated on a clear indication that you will continue to provide a substantial contribution to the program. Approval is required for all continuations of service following endorsement by the sponsoring organization. Members are limited to five years of service.

In the tenth month of service, you receive the Future Plans Form, which asks whether you wish to complete service as scheduled or to reenroll or extend. In approving a request for continuation of service, your performance, as evaluated by the project supervisor and the AmeriCorps Portfolio Manager, along with your skills and experience, are considered. Continuation of service is also subject to the availability of an appropriate assignment and to the availability of funds for member support.

To request continuation of service, you must complete the Future Plans Form at least 90 days before your scheduled end-of-service date. (This form is on your member homepage in [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) under “Close-of-Service”.)

AmeriCorps VISTA will notify you and the sponsoring organization whether the request for continuation of service was approved at least four weeks before the end of service. The early termination provisions and volunteer grievance procedures do not apply to continuation of service denials.

## **RESTRICTIONS AND REQUIREMENTS**

If there is a break of more than 120 days between service years, you are again subject to members background check. The background check entails a search of the National Sex Offenders Public Registry, full disclosure of convictions, and criminal history check. For questions, please contact your AmeriCorps Field Office.

## **LIFE AFTER AMERICORPS VISTA**

### **CERTIFICATION OF SERVICE**

When you have completed service, log onto [my.americorps.gov](https://my.americorps.gov) to print a letter of AmeriCorps VISTA Verification of Service. This letter serves as proof of your service and includes your dates of service. Click the “My Service Letters” link to create and print your letter. If your letter is incorrect or if the system is unable to locate your record, please contact the AmeriCorps Hotline at <https://questions.americorps.gov/>.

### **STAYING INVOLVED**

AmeriCorps VISTA encourages you to stay in touch with our program and become involved with the national [AmeriCorps Alumni Network](#) after you complete your year of service. As an alum, you can help recruit new members, share your story of service, and continue to serve. For information and services that help you stay involved with the AmeriCorps community, visit the [Alumni Page](#) of the AmeriCorps website.

### **SERVICE AND YOUR CAREER**

For many, service in AmeriCorps VISTA is the first step in a rewarding career in public service. Helping to address critical community needs can be inspiring. Putting your idealism, energy, and experience to work in a career that helps others can be the perfect way to incorporate your service into the rest of your life.

In a [2016 study](#) conducted by AmeriCorps on AmeriCorps Alumni outcomes, it was noted that a high percentage of alumni of VISTA benefitted both personally and professionally during their service. Of the over 3,000 respondents surveyed in 2016:

- 46% of alumni who were employed within six months of ending service attributed their employment to a connection made while serving as a member.
- About 50% of alumni indicated that their service opened up a career path they wouldn't have otherwise considered.
- 74% of alumni agreed that their service was a professionally defining experience.
- 77% of alumni agreed that their service was a personally defining experience.

In addition to the personal fulfillment gained during service, AmeriCorps VISTA offers some exceptional career benefits, such as Non-Competitive Eligibility for Federal Jobs, and graduate schools that match the Education Award.

## **VISTA CAMPUS JOB BOARD**

When searching for jobs, be sure to access the free [VISTA Campus Job Board](#). AmeriCorps VISTA regularly encourages employers from the federal, private, and public sectors to post job opportunities of particular interest to VISTA alumni skillsets. Check back frequently to view and apply to postings.

## **NON-COMPETITIVE ELIGIBILITY FOR FEDERAL GOVERNMENT JOBS**

One of the benefits of successfully completing your year of service as a member is the option to use the Non-Competitive Eligibility (NCE) hiring status to help obtain federal employment. NCE does not guarantee you a federal position; you must locate an agency with a vacancy and interest in hiring you. The links below provide further guidance on how to access and use your NCE benefit. Note that VISTA alums are the only AmeriCorps Alums to receive this benefit, which is good for one year starting from your end of service date. NCE can be extended for up to two more years past the expiration date by the hiring agency, under certain conditions as listed below.

- NCE is a special hiring appointment granted to AmeriCorps VISTA alumni in Executive Order No. 11103 (April 10, 1963). – Section 415(d), Title IV, of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended.
- NCE permits (but does not require) a federal agency to noncompetitively hire an AmeriCorps VISTA alum who meets the minimum qualifications for the position.

- A hiring agency may extend the NCE period for two additional years if the AmeriCorps VISTA alum, after the qualifying service, is:
  - In the military;
  - Studying at a recognized institution of higher learning; or
  - Engaged in another activity which, in the hiring agency’s view, warrants extension.
- The use of NCE status is up to the federal hiring manager.
- AmeriCorps VISTA alumni must use their Verification of VISTA Service letter available via [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) as documentation for their NCE status.
  - Resources for further understanding NCE:
    - [How to use NCE Fact Sheet](#)
    - [AmeriCorps Website on NCE](#)
    - [USAJobs Help Center](#)

## **EMPLOYERS OF NATIONAL SERVICE INITIATIVE**

Launched in 2014, the purpose of the [Employers of National Service](#) (EONS) initiative is to create a talent pipeline connecting AmeriCorps and Peace Corps alumni with leading employers from the private, public and nonprofit sectors. To learn more about [Employers of National Service](#) and see a full list of participating employers, visit <https://americorps.gov/partner/partnerships/employers-national-service>. Additional job-seeking resources can be found in the [Alumni section](#) of the AmeriCorps website, including: Understanding Benefits of Service, National Service Resume Basics, Creative Networking, Answering FAQs from Employers, and Employment and Alumni with Disabilities.

## **APPLYING AMERICORPS VISTA SERVICE TOWARDS FEDERAL BENEFITS/RETIREMENT**

Alumni can count their service year(s) towards vacation accrual and retirement once employed with the federal government. Alumni may make a FERS (Federal Employee Retirement System) service credit deposit payment for any period of service (excluding training time), regardless of when the service was performed. Paying the service credit deposit will make this volunteer time creditable toward federal retirement. Alumni who become federal employees must contact the Human Resources/Benefits personnel at their federal agency to initiate the deposit process and to make sure they are accruing vacation at the appropriate rate. Learn more about applying service towards federal benefits/retirement at the [OPM website](#).

# Chapter 13: Administrative Policies

## ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES

From time to time, unforeseen events occur that affect a member’s status of service. For example, the project loses a key financial supporter; the sponsor staff leave the organization; the member becomes seriously ill; the member does not perform adequately; undisclosed criminal history is discovered, etc. In instances such as these, AmeriCorps must act to resolve the untenable situation. A candidate who has not yet sworn in as a member may face deselection. A member may elect to resign from the AmeriCorps VISTA program. Also, a member may be given the opportunity to transfer to another program, or face 1) early termination for cause; 2) early termination for lack of suitable assignment; or 3) early termination for medical reasons.



This chapter discusses the steps taken when circumstances necessitate a change in service or a separation from service for a member.

## BREAK IN SERVICE

### ADMINISTRATIVE HOLD STATUS

Under certain circumstances, AmeriCorps staff may place you in “administrative hold” status in the VISTA program. During the time you are on administrative hold, you are not assigned to project; however, you are still a member and are subject to all program laws, regulations, and policies.

Examples of when AmeriCorps staff may place you on administrative hold status include, but are not limited to, when the project in which you have been serving ceases operations or when the sponsoring organization where you have been serving requests your removal from its project.

At the discretion of AmeriCorps, while you are on administrative hold, your living allowance may continue. However, the living allowance may cease if you are engaged in activities that violate AmeriCorps or AmeriCorps VISTA program laws, regulations, or policies.

Your end-of-service stipend or education award accrues during the administrative hold period. The accrual of certain other payments – as listed in the table below – may also continue.

**STATUS OF SERVICE AND ELIGIBILITY FOR BENEFITS**

Status of Service	Education Award	End-of-Service Stipend	Living Allowance
Successful completion of year of service	Full	Full	Payments end
Deferral of service	Accrual discontinues	Accrual discontinues	Payments discontinue
Transfer to another AmeriCorps VISTA project	Accrual continues	Accrual continues	Payments continue
Early departure for another AmeriCorps program	Prorated, if served at least 335 days	Prorated, if served at least 335 days	Payments end
Deselection	No	No	No
Early termination for cause (misconduct)	No	No	Payments end
Medical termination	Prorated	Prorated	Payments end
Early termination for non-compelling reason(s)	No	No	Payments end

## **CHANGE IN SERVICE**

### **TRANSFER TO ANOTHER AMERICORPS VISTA PROJECT**

Transfer between projects is an uncommon occurrence, but it is sometimes warranted. Examples when this may be warranted include project closure, natural disaster, or other extenuating circumstance. AmeriCorps may approve the transfer of a member to a different project during a term of service. The AmeriCorps staff member may approve transfers when he or she determines the following conditions are met:

- The member has the necessary qualifications and desire to continue service but is unable to do so at the current project assignment;
- The project-sponsoring organization that would be receiving the member concurs in the transfer after contacting the former sponsoring organization or AmeriCorps staff for an evaluation or assessment of the member.

Members are typically given a fifteen (15) day opportunity period to seek and secure transfer to another project. During this opportunity period, members are placed in administrative hold status in the AmeriCorps VISTA program.

### **EARLY DEPARTURE FOR ANOTHER AMERICORPS PROGRAM**

In addition to VISTA, AmeriCorps has two other major community service programs. They are the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (AmeriCorps NCCC), and the AmeriCorps State and National program. AmeriCorps supports members who are serving in one AmeriCorps program to continue their commitment to service by serving in another AmeriCorps program. To that end, AmeriCorps members in the VISTA program are encouraged to serve in another AmeriCorps program following their VISTA service.

There may be instances when an member who has nearly completed AmeriCorps VISTA service is accepted into a Peace Corps position or one of the other two AmeriCorps programs and is required to depart service early to start training or service. To accommodate such an instance, a member who has completed at least 335 days of service may terminate service with AmeriCorps VISTA with a prorated award in order to meet a window of opportunity to enter either AmeriCorps NCCC, AmeriCorps State and National, or Peace Corps service.

A prorated portion of the education award or end-of-service stipend corresponds to that portion of the term served. For example, a member who has served 350 days would be eligible to receive 96 percent of the education award or 96 percent of the

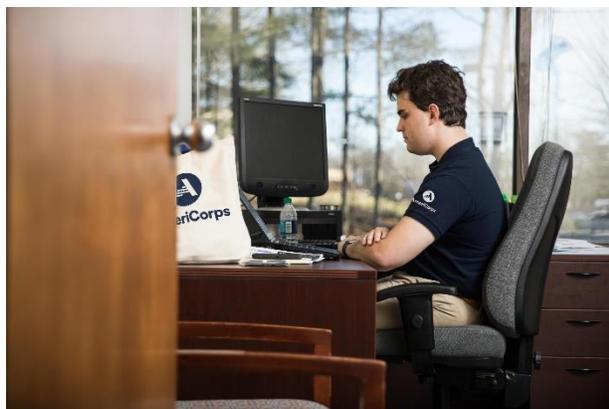
end-of-service stipend ( $350/365 = .959$ ). The member is required to prove acceptance by the other service program to receive a prorated education award or end-of-service stipend. The member may do so by submitting written proof of such acceptance to the AmeriCorps Field Office.

## **DEFERRAL OF SERVICE**

During the course of service, if you have to leave your service for a period of more than 30 days but not more than six (6) months, and your departure is due to very narrow, extenuating circumstances, you may be placed in “deferral of service” status by AmeriCorps staff. However, approval for deferral of service status is quite rare.

Extenuating circumstances that justify attaining a deferral of service status are either a member’s need to take military reserve leave or to fulfill a jury duty obligation of more than 30 days.

You are not accorded deferral of service status if you are removed from service for circumstances related to your proposed termination, your termination for cause, your eligibility for a medical termination, or your removal from a project.



If you are placed in deferral of service status, you may be reinstated into service within six (6) months without resubmitting an entire member application form and without attending another Pre-Service Orientation. If your leave based on deferral of service status extends beyond six (6) months, your deferral of service status ceases and you will be exited from the VISTA program. To be reinstated once the leave is over, AmeriCorps may require you to resubmit a new member application form.

If you are placed in deferral of service status, you may be reinstated into service within six (6) months without resubmitting an entire member application form and without attending another Pre-Service Orientation. If your leave based on deferral of service status extends beyond six (6) months, your deferral of service status ceases and you will be exited from the VISTA program. To be

reinstated once the leave is over, AmeriCorps may require you to resubmit a new member application form.

During the time you are in deferral of service status, any or all allowances and end-of-term benefits are discontinued, including your living allowance, your accrual of the end-of-service stipend, your accrual of the education award, and your service-related travel reimbursement. If you return to successfully complete your service following a period of deferral, you are eligible to receive the end-of-service stipend or the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, whichever is applicable.

## **SEPARATION FROM SERVICE**

### **DESELECTION**

To ensure that sponsoring organizations receive members who meet or exceed the expectations and requirements of service, AmeriCorps may deselect a candidate before enrollment in the VISTA program. Reasons for deselection include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Failure to meet VISTA Member Orientation (VMO) training selection standards which include, but are not limited to, the following types of conduct:
  - Inability or refusal to perform or complete training assignments,
  - Disruptive or inappropriate conduct during VMO sessions, or
  - Failure to attend training VMO webinars.
- Refusal or inability to accept the VISTA Assignment Description.
- Refusal or inability to accept any term or condition of service.
- Failure to take the Oath of Service and/or to properly submit the electronic Oath of Service form.
- Failure to commence service.

### **EARLY TERMINATION FOR CAUSE**

AmeriCorps may terminate you as a member based on your conduct or performance (termination for cause), such as the following non-exhaustive reasons:

- Conviction of a criminal offense under federal, state, or local statute or ordinance;
- Violation of any provision of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, or an AmeriCorps regulation, policy, or guideline;
- Failure, refusal, or inability to perform prescribed project duties as outlined in the project application or assignment description and as directed by the sponsoring organization to which you are assigned;
- Involvement in activities that substantially interfere with your performance of project duties;
- Intentional false statement, omission, fraud, or deception in obtaining selection as a member;
- Any conduct on your part that substantially diminishes your effectiveness as an AmeriCorps VISTA member; or
- Unsatisfactory performance of assignment.

Grounds for termination for cause also include: a member's failure to perform assignments in the VMO; a member's failure to punctually submit information to AmeriCorps for completion of a criminal history check; being Absent Without Leave from a project site (even for a day); and exhausting and exceeding allowable leave prior to the end of your service term.

## **MEDICAL TERMINATION**

If you are unable to perform or resume project duties because of a medical condition, or if it reasonably appears that you are unable to perform or resume your project duties within the approved medical leave period, you are subject to medical termination. AmeriCorps determines whether to terminate you for a medical reason(s) on the basis of information from your attending medical professional, or other relevant information obtained by AmeriCorps.

When it is determined that you are unable to perform or resume project duties, AmeriCorps issues you a written notice of medical termination, which includes the effective date. Following your submission of required documentation, you may be eligible to receive a prorated end-of-service award (i.e., a prorated education award or prorated stipend). If you medically terminate and wish to serve again with AmeriCorps VISTA, you must reapply to the program to start a new, full term of service.

You may appeal the AmeriCorps decision of medical termination. If you choose to appeal, you must submit a written appeal and supporting documentation within fifteen (15) days of receiving the written notice of medical termination. The written appeal and supporting documentation are submitted to the VMSU Director.

The VMSU Director reviews all appeal information submitted and may request additional information. After review of all pertinent information, the VMSU Director renders a final decision on your appeal. If the final decision on appeal sustains the medical termination, the medical termination remains in effect. If the final decision on appeal overturns the medical termination, you are reinstated into AmeriCorps VISTA service retroactive to the effective date of termination. The final decision on appeal is a final agency decision.

## **REMOVAL FROM PROJECT**

Removal of a member from serving in a particular project assignment sometimes occurs. There are two common ways such a removal may occur: (1) a project requests

a member's removal, or (2) a project cannot continue to operate all or part of its AmeriCorps VISTA program.

With regard to the first scenario, the project requests the removal in writing to the AmeriCorps Field Office, and the request should be supported by a statement of reason.

The sole authority for terminating a member, or giving a member the opportunity to transfer, rests with AmeriCorps. The sponsoring organization's request for removal of a member, including a written statement addressing the circumstances, is submitted to the AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager. A VISTA Case Manager notifies the member of the request. During the period when AmeriCorps is assessing whether proposing termination for cause is warranted, or instead, providing the member an opportunity to transfer to another project, the member is placed in administrative hold status where he or she may not return to the project site or sponsoring organization. The member is notified in writing of his or her administrative hold status, whether he or she will receive allowances, and the prohibition on engagement in any project-related activities during that period.

AmeriCorps will take one of the following actions concerning a member who has been removed from a project assignment:

- Accept the member's resignation from the AmeriCorps VISTA program, which is an option at any time in the process;
- A Portfolio Manager may be available to support the member in locating another suitable assignment if the removal was not due to conduct or performance issues. If the member does not secure reassignment within the prescribed opportunity period, the member is terminated from service for lack of suitable assignment. In some instances, such an early termination from the program would be for a non-cause reason. There are no 45 CFR Part 2556 appeal rights for early termination for lack of suitable assignment. Members may grieve terminations for lack of suitable assignment under [45 CFR Part 2556.350\(a\)](#);
- If removal from the project is for a reason listed above in "Early Termination for Cause," the member may appeal the early termination to establish whether such termination from service is supported by sufficient evidence. Termination appeal procedures are outlined in [45 CFR Part 2556 Subpart E](#); or
- If AmeriCorps determines that removal from the project based on a reason cited under "Early Termination for Cause" is not established by adequate evidence, AmeriCorps will cease termination for cause proceedings and provide the member an opportunity to secure reassignment at another project. If the

member does not secure reassignment within the prescribed opportunity period, the member will be terminated for lack of suitable assignment.

With regard to the second reason a member may be removed from a project assignment, the removal may occur because a project cannot continue to operate all or part of its AmeriCorps VISTA program. Examples of this type of removal from a project happen when the Memorandum of Agreement between AmeriCorps and the sponsoring organization is terminated or not renewed. In such cases, the member's removal from the project is due to no fault of his/her own, and the member is placed in administrative hold status and given an opportunity to secure reassignment. If, despite the member's good faith efforts to secure reassignment, no appropriate reassignment is secured by the member within the prescribed opportunity period, the member may be terminated for lack of suitable assignment. Depending upon the situation, his/her termination may be based on a "compelling personal circumstance" and s/he may be eligible for a prorated end-of-service award. The VISTA Case Manager assesses the relevant facts and determines whether the member has established a compelling, personal circumstance, and is therefore eligible for a prorated award.

## **TERMINATION FOR LACK OF SUITABLE ASSIGNMENT**

If AmeriCorps removes a member from a project, for reasons other than those listed above in "Early Termination for Cause," the AmeriCorps Field Office may be available to support the member in locating another assignment. If the member does not secure reassignment within the prescribed time period, the member is terminated from service for lack of a suitable assignment.

Termination for lack of suitable assignment is never, by itself, sufficient to make a member eligible for a prorated education award or end-of-service stipend. Specifically, a member who is terminated for lack of a suitable assignment is not eligible for a prorated education award or end-of-service stipend unless the member can also demonstrate the early termination was due to a "compelling personal circumstance." For example, a member's lack of interest in a possible new assignment does not establish a compelling personal circumstance. Similarly, the fact that a possible new assignment is not similar to the member's prior project assignment does not establish a compelling personal circumstance. Moreover, a member's multiple, yet unsuccessful, efforts to secure reassignment are not sufficient, by themselves, to establish a compelling personal circumstance. Rather, examples of situations that constitute a compelling personal circumstance are listed below in "Early Termination of a VISTA Member for a Compelling Personal Circumstance."

If a member is offered an appropriate reassignment and declines the new assignment, AmeriCorps has no obligation to offer additional or alternative assignments. In this instance, the member is not eligible to receive a prorated education award or end-of-service stipend.

A member terminated early for lack of suitable assignment does not have appeal rights under 45 CFR Part 2556; however, the member may grieve termination for lack of suitable assignment under [45 CFR Part 2556.350](#) and 2556.360.

## **RESIGNATION**

If the VISTA Case Manager believes that you may be subject to "for-cause termination" for any reasons cited above in "Early Termination for Cause," the VISTA Case Manager will communicate with you about the matter. If the staff member states that grounds for termination exist, you will be given an opportunity to resign in lieu of being terminated for cause. You, or a designee, may inform the VISTA Case Manager in writing that you are resigning from the AmeriCorps VISTA program. If you do not resign, the administrative procedures outlined in [45 CFR Part 2556.420](#) will be followed.

You may also choose to resign from service for personal reasons. Resignations must always be in writing. When practicable, written notice of resignation should be given at least two weeks in advance to ensure that your departure will be minimally disruptive to the project and the AmeriCorps VISTA program.

Members who intend to resign early from service should notify their supervisor, who will contact the AmeriCorps Field Office. AmeriCorps will unlock the Future Plans Form in the Close of Service area of the member's [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) account. Once the Future Plans Form is unlocked, the member completes Part A of the form and notifies the supervisor to complete Part B and submit to AmeriCorps. It is important to notify AmeriCorps in time to avoid overpayment of the biweekly living allowance and other member allowances and benefits.

## **EARLY TERMINATION OF A VISTA MEMBER FOR A COMPELLING PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCE**

In rare circumstances, members may qualify for a prorated end-of-service stipend or prorated education award because they demonstrate that they need to leave service early for a "compelling personal circumstance."

The VISTA Case Manager retains the authority to approve a member's eligibility for a prorated end-of-service stipend or prorated education award if the member leaves service early because of a compelling personal circumstance, such as:

- Serious medical condition or disability of the member, which prohibits the member from effectively completing his/her term of service;
- Death, critical illness, or disability of an immediate family member (spouse, domestic partner, parent, grandparent, sibling, child, or legal guardian), if this event makes completing a term unreasonably difficult or impossible; or
- Conditions attributable to either nature or the program and not to the member, such as natural disaster, strike, or premature closing of a project or program, that makes completing a term unreasonably difficult or impossible.

A prorated end-of-service stipend or prorated education award may also be given for public policy reasons or other extenuating circumstances, as determined by the VISTA Case Manager, such as:

- Fulfilling military service obligations;
- Fulfilling jury duty obligations;
- Accepting permanent employment by a member who is a recipient of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF);
- Accepting another AmeriCorps or NCCC position (if VISTA member has served at least 335 days); or
- Accepting a Peace Corps Volunteer position (if VISTA member has served at least 335 days).

Under no circumstances does a member's termination for cause make the member eligible for a prorated end-of-service award. In addition, neither resigning from service, outside of the reasons listed for a CPC, nor leaving service to enroll in school, nor leaving service to obtain or to engage in employment, makes a member eligible for a prorated end-of-service award. Similarly, a member's dissatisfaction with the project or program does not make the member eligible for a prorated end-of-service award. Additionally, absent a showing of a compelling personal circumstance, termination for lack of suitable assignment does not make a member eligible for a prorated end-of-service award.

Generally, members have the responsibility for demonstrating a compelling personal circumstance that prevents them from completing their term of service. Members must communicate and provide documentation of these circumstances to the VISTA Case Manager for a determination.

## Types of Acceptable Documentation to Show a Compelling Personal Circumstance

- **Serious medical condition or disability of the member** – Documentation from the treating physician or other medical provider that indicates the member is unable to continue to serve because of a serious medical condition or a disabling condition. Documentation must be on official letterhead and include the medical provider's contact information.
- **Critical illness or disability of an immediate family member** – Documentation from the treating physician or other medical provider that indicates an immediate family member has a critical illness or disabling condition. Documentation must be on official letterhead and include the medical provider's contact information.
- **Death of an immediate family member** – A copy of the death certificate, reference to a published obituary, or other official written documentation of death (e.g., copy of newspaper article).
- **Fulfilling military service obligations** – A copy of the member's orders to report for military service.
- **Fulfilling jury duty obligations** – A copy of the court notice requiring the member to report, as well as selection, for jury duty.
- **Accepting employment by a member who is a recipient of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families** – Documentation from the appropriate government office indicating the member is a recipient of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), as well as documentation of employment acceptance from the employer.
- **Accepting another AmeriCorps or NCCC position (if the member has served at least 335 days)** – Documentation of the member's acceptance into the AmeriCorps or NCCC program and the training or start date.
- **Accepting a Peace Corps Volunteer position (if VISTA has served at least 335 days)** – Documentation of the member's acceptance into Peace Corps and the training or start date.

## Chapter 14: Terms & Conditions of Service

### TERMS & CONDITIONS OF SERVICE

The chapter introduces you to other important terms and conditions of service, such as limitation on activities, expressing views and concerns regarding service, property

loss, responsibility for financial debt, intellectual property created during service, the evacuation policy for members, and more.

## **TELESERVICE**



A fundamental assumption of service is that members serve in a low-income community at the sponsor's location and project site. Under limited circumstances, the AmeriCorps Field Office may approve a member's request to perform service with a project under a teleservice agreement where they can perform project-related duties from home. Members who request to serve under a teleservice arrangement under

the auspices of a reasonable accommodation request are excluded from this policy, as those requests are covered under other laws and policies.

Requests for episodic teleservice, not to exceed two days per week, may be considered after a member has been serving satisfactorily at the project site at least one month. The supervisor must agree that the following service requirements are fully satisfied:

1. The member knows the organization and the people within it well enough to effectively build capacity within the organization
2. The member lives near and serves the people in the community and knows the community and people sufficiently to serve them well
3. The member has proven to the sponsor/supervisor to be a reliable team member (punctual, motivated, professional, thorough, etc.)
4. The member understands that service is not a 9-5 assignment; that it demands flexibility and availability in one's schedule
5. The supervisor acts as a coach and mentor and goes beyond the responsibilities of a supervisor to an employee
6. The member has access to reliable internet and phone to be able to teleserve and be contacted as needed.

In addition to the prerequisites above, the member's VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) must lend itself to teleservice by including tasks that can be completed from home.

To apply for an episodic teleservice arrangement, a member must (1) download the [Teleservice Request Form](#); (2) complete the form and obtain the supervisor's approval and signature; and (3) ensure the Supervisor maintains a copy of the signed form. A member cannot engage in teleservice unless the member gets the written approval of the supervisor. At the discretion of AmeriCorps, a teleservice arrangement for a member can be revoked at any time, without prior notice.

## **RULES AND RESTRICTIONS**

### **Outside Employment**

As a member, you are expected to honor your commitment to serve on a full-time basis for one year. While members are allowed to seek and secure outside part-time employment, it must not conflict with the member's service or service hours as assigned by the sponsor.

Members must remain available for service at all times during the member's term of service, except for periods of approved leave. As a result, you may not be absent from the project without approval from the sponsoring organization or supervisor.

If you take outside employment while serving as a member, you are not permitted to be an employee of or contractor for the sponsor or sub-site to which you are assigned to serve. While in service, you may only accept outside employment for positions that are:

- Legal;
- Part-time;
- Do not conflict with your service or service hours;
- Do not violate any applicable Federal, state, or local laws and regulations;
- Do not conflict with any AmeriCorps VISTA program requirements or policies; and
- Approved by supervisor.

Before accepting such outside employment, you must obtain the approval of your supervisor. If you are already working in a part-time position, you must immediately obtain the approval of your supervisor to continue to do so. To approve your outside employment, your supervisor must ensure there is no conflict between the employment and your service or service hours. Accepting outside employment without prior authorization from your supervisor is cause for termination.

To obtain supervisor approval before accepting outside employment, please complete and submit the [Outside Employment Request Form](#) to your supervisor.

Additionally, individuals may not enroll in another AmeriCorps program while serving with AmeriCorps VISTA. Concurrent enrollment in another program (AmeriCorps NCCC, AmeriCorps State/National, etc.) is not permitted.

## **ADDITIONAL TERMS OF SERVICE**

Under certain circumstances, a member may extend or reenroll in service beyond one year, for up to five years. You may pursue additional terms of service with your initial project or in another area of interest as a member or leader. Extensions and reenrollments are subject to AmeriCorps approval.

## **EDUCATIONAL COURSES**

Members and leaders may participate in online or in-person classes, regardless of subject matter, during their service year. However, the AmeriCorps VISTA program is a full immersion experience that requires its members to be able to attend community meetings and dedicate themselves to understanding and serving the community to which they are assigned.

Course work and class scheduling must not interfere with the operations of the project or your responsibilities. You and your supervisor will need to determine whether course requirements detract from your commitment to the project. If you enrolled in a class(es) before you became a member, discuss your study plan right away with your supervisor and make sure that the class(es) will not interfere with your project. Enrollment in courses without prior authorization from your supervisor is cause for termination.

Service to the sponsoring organization and community takes precedence over course work. If a member or leader is unable to complete assigned tasks or responsibilities due to course work, the supervisor will contact the AmeriCorps Field Office. If schedules and demands of the sponsoring organization and the course cannot be balanced, the AmeriCorps Field Office will direct the member or leader to withdraw from the course. Failure to withdraw will be cause for termination from the program and forfeiture of all benefits.

## **FINANCIAL OBLIGATIONS**

A member may participate in scholarship and financial aid programs, provided the program requirements do not interfere with the operations of the project to which they are assigned or the responsibilities of the member. The project's needs supersede any such program requirements.

## **WORK STUDY, FELLOWSHIP, AND INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS**

A member may participate in paid work study, fellowships, and/or internship programs provided the fellowship or program is not in conflict with the duties and other relevant policies of service.

## **MEMBER HOUSING**

One of the three fundamental assumptions of AmeriCorps VISTA is that the skills and energies of members are used most effectively when they live and work with the low-income people they are serving. In keeping with this philosophy, you are expected to secure housing using your living allowance, which is provided to cover the basic costs of food, housing, and utilities. You should look for housing within the community to which you are assigned. Because members' living allowances are limited, you are allowed to accept offers of free or low-cost housing made by community members, local organizations, educational institutions, or sponsoring organizations.

Some examples of housing that you may accept include:

- A community resident offers unused free housing space to you because he or she is proud to have a member in the community.
- A local business wants to offer a vacant apartment over the shop area.
- A national housing company offers reduced-rate housing for volunteers who are serving in a given community and you meet the eligibility requirements.
- A local, state, or federal government agency provides free or low-cost housing in areas with limited housing opportunities.
- A sponsoring organization rents housing space on your behalf.
- A sponsoring organization allows you to occupy a portion of existing space the sponsor already owns or rents.

Under no circumstances may you accept money directly from a sponsoring organization to supplement your living allowance or pay for rent or mortgage. All

housing support must be paid directly to the landlord, leasing agent, or mortgage holder.

Accepting free or reduced-cost housing may increase the amount of your reportable income for tax purposes. If you receive housing assistance you may receive a 1099 form to aid you in reporting this on your tax return.

You are also fully responsible for any legal or financial issues with your landlord (e.g., the project closes and you owe money on your lease).

## **EXPRESSING YOUR VIEWS AND CONCERNS REGARDING SERVICE**

There are procedures that allow for systematic and open communication of your views, and for effective resolution of your concerns regarding the terms and conditions of your service.

### **INFORMAL PROCEDURE**

AmeriCorps provides for:

- A free and open opportunity for you to communicate your views to appropriate AmeriCorps officials
- An opportunity for you to be heard in connection with the terms and conditions of your service
- Response to and possible resolution of your problems or concerns by appropriate AmeriCorps officials

If you believe your concerns regarding the terms and conditions of service have not been properly addressed, you may communicate those concerns directly to your AmeriCorps field Office which can be found here: <https://americorps.gov/contact/region-offices>

### **AMERICORPS VISTA GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE**

During your service, a circumstance may arise that directly affects your service situation or that you believe violates regulations governing the terms and conditions of service, resulting in a denial or infringement of a right or benefit to you. In such a circumstance, you may file a grievance.

The member grievance procedure is contained in 45 CFR Part 2556.360. You should read the procedure in its entirety before initiating any grievance. Under this procedure, you are not permitted to grieve matters for which a separate administrative procedure (e.g., discrimination complaints as discussed in [Chapter 15](#)) is provided. Consequently, you may not grieve matters that are processed through the Volunteer Discrimination Complaint Procedure, which is contained in 45 CFR Part 1225 Subpart B.

## **PROPERTY LOSS**

Members, leaders, and candidates are responsible for safeguarding their personal property. Neither AmeriCorps nor the VISTA program is an insurer of personal property or cash and does not replace or reimburse for the loss of personal property or cash.

AmeriCorps does not insure personal property; however, it can reimburse members for lost, damaged, or stolen property under certain circumstances and for limited amounts. You are strongly urged not to take expensive property to assignments and to maintain your own insurance against property loss and damage during your service.

If essential belongings are lost, you will be reimbursed only with sufficient funds (up to \$500.00 for your service term) to obtain replacement items adequate to function on your assignment. For example, if you lose expensive items in your wardrobe, reimbursement is based on the cost of replacing the items with clothing suitable for the project assignment. No reimbursement is made for luxury items, such as photographic or electronic equipment, unless they are deemed essential to your assignment.

If you suffer a loss, the VISTA Member Support Unit requires a written statement, that:

- Describes in detail the circumstances surrounding the loss.
- Itemizes the property or allowance lost.
- Explains why the property or allowance is essential to your ability to serve effectively.
- Indicates whether the property or allowance was covered by insurance.
  - If the property or allowance was covered by insurance, includes the policy number (if known), whether and when a claim has been presented to the insurer, and the action, if any, the insurer has taken with respect to the claim.

- States that you agree to reimburse AmeriCorps for any such recovery of replaced property or payments received in reimbursement.
- Provides evidence, in the case of theft, that such theft has been reported to the appropriate law enforcement authorities. Such evidence should include a copy of the police report. Lost or stolen allowance checks are not covered by these procedures. Please refer to [Chapter 5](#)'s guidance related to payment by paper check for the specific policy dealing with lost checks.

## **OTHER MATTERS WHILE IN SERVICE**

### **RESPONSIBILITY FOR FINANCIAL DEBTS**

AmeriCorps is not responsible for debts incurred by you to commercial creditors, regardless of when you incur a debt. AmeriCorps has no authority to act as an intermediary to collect private debts on behalf of a creditor or claimant, nor does AmeriCorps have the authority to direct you to take specific action concerning your financial affairs.

You are encouraged to pay all legal debts promptly to avoid a situation that would impair your ability to effectively complete your term of service. In cases of continued financial irresponsibility to the extent of embarrassment or adverse reflection upon the sponsoring organization's project or the AmeriCorps VISTA program, AmeriCorps may take administrative or disciplinary action up to and including termination.

Neither you nor the sponsoring organization is authorized to obtain extension of credit by representing yourself as an employee of the federal government. AmeriCorps also assumes no financial responsibility for a nonmember spouse or for dependents.

### **KEEPING IN TOUCH**

#### **Change of Address Notification**

If your contact information changes (phone number, email, mailing address), you must update your profile on your Member Homepage in your [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) account immediately to ensure timely delivery of correspondence and tax documents.

## **Change of Name Notification**

The AmeriCorps Field Office and the VISTA Member Support Unit should be notified in writing via the National Service Hotline of a change in your name or marital status for record keeping. Legal documentation of the name change (marriage certificate, divorce decree, name change form) is required. Documentation should be provided to the National Service Hotline via a secure link, which can be requested by calling the AmeriCorps Hotline, and must include full name, NSPID and contact information.

## **Disclosure and Use of Member Addresses**

AmeriCorps will use members' private addresses for internal administrative purposes only. Your private address (home of record or residence during service) may be disclosed by AmeriCorps with your prior written permission, or to duly authorized representatives of federal investigative agencies, including AmeriCorps' Office of Inspector General, and pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act.

The mailing address of projects are public knowledge and may be disclosed when requested.

## **SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT**

Because it is the policy of AmeriCorps to encourage self-help and mobilization of resources, AmeriCorps does not provide equipment or supplies required by members in their project assignment. If special equipment or supplies are necessary to successfully implement a project, they must be provided by the sponsoring organization.

## **DONATED AND OTHER GIFTS TO BENEFIT THE PROJECT**

AmeriCorps does not pay shipping costs for gifts or materials that have been donated or obtained by you to benefit the project to which you are assigned. Such costs should be borne by the sponsoring organization.

## **INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY CREATED DURING SERVICE**

You have the right to copyright work that is subject to copyright, including software designs, training manuals, curricula, videotapes, and other products created by you while serving as a member. You may not sell any work, however, that includes an

AmeriCorps logo without prior written approval of AmeriCorps. By enrolling in AmeriCorps VISTA, with regard to products created by you while serving as a member, you agree to give AmeriCorps and the sponsoring organization an unlimited, royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable license to obtain, use, reproduce, publish, or disseminate products, including data produced for the sponsoring organization, and you agree to authorize others to do so. AmeriCorps may distribute such products through a designated clearinghouse.

## **EVACUATION POLICY FOR AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBERS**

If an emergency situation arises in your area of service that poses a potential or actual threat to life or property, such as a natural disaster, you are expected to abide by the evacuation policy for members:

- Follow the orders or recommendations of the state and local governments regarding the need to evacuate an area and any other necessary safety measures.
- Seek safe haven (evacuation shelters, etc.) and contact the AmeriCorps Field Office and your project supervisor to notify them of your whereabouts within 48 hours. If the AmeriCorps Field Office cannot be reached, contact the National Service Hotline at 800-942-2677; identify yourself, your project, your current location, and how best to contact you.
- If after five days, you cannot return to your project site:
  - Contact the AmeriCorps Field Office to confirm the state of emergency. If the Field Office cannot be contacted, return to your home of record, and call the National Service Hotline at 800-942-2677, to inform AmeriCorps of your return home. If your home of record is in the affected community, remain in the safe haven. If the field office foresees the possibility of you returning to your site within a work week, it may request you to remain in safe haven, provided you are secure.
  - Unless otherwise directed by the AmeriCorps Field Office, you are placed in administrative hold and you continue to receive a living allowance for 30 days. You may seek an assignment at another project in another area through a request to the AmeriCorps Field Office. If after 30 days, your original project site remains closed, and no other assignment has been identified, then your service is terminated for compelling reasons.
- An advance for emergency expenses, including return to home of record, up to \$500, is available from your sponsoring organization. If funds are not available, contact the AmeriCorps Field Office. If the Field Office cannot be reached and you need to request an advance for travel, call the National Service Hotline at

800-942-2677, for assistance. Remember to keep the receipts to verify your emergency travel expenditures.

## **Chapter 15: Basic Laws & Federal Regulations**

### **BASIC LAWS & FEDERAL REGULATIONS**

AmeriCorps is a federal agency in the Executive Branch of the U.S. government. The following federal laws and regulations must be carried out by AmeriCorps, and followed by sponsoring organizations, accordingly. As a member, you are required to follow these laws and regulations and are afforded certain legal protections provided by them.

### **ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS: AGE & CITIZENSHIP**

You may apply to serve as a member as long as you will be at least 18 years old when you take the oath of service. There is no upper age limit and many retired individuals have fond memories of serving with AmeriCorps VISTA.

To serve in AmeriCorps VISTA, individuals must be US citizens, US nationals, lawful permanent residents, or persons legally residing in a state. Persons legally residing in a state include those having the following legal residency classifications:

- Refugee status
- Asylum or Asylee status
- Temporary protected status
- Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status

Prior to attending training or starting service, you may be requested to submit documentation verifying that you are either a United States citizen, a United States national, or a person legally residing within a state. Your AmeriCorps Field Office will provide instructions. To be eligible to serve in AmeriCorps VISTA, all non-U.S. citizens must have a permanent resident visa (e.g., green card) or other indication of eligible status.

By law, only members who are either: US citizens; US nationals; or lawful permanent resident aliens (sometimes referred to as “lawful permanent residents”), are eligible to

receive an AmeriCorps Segal Education Award in lieu of an end-of-service cash stipend. Persons legally residing in a state – but who are not US citizens, US nationals, or lawful permanent residents – are only eligible to receive an end-of-service cash stipend.

See 45 C.F.R. Part 2556 Subpart C and Subpart D for more information regarding these basic eligibility requirements, terms, protections, and benefits.

## **OATH OF SERVICE**

Upon enrollment in service, you must take an oath as set forth in 5 U.S.C. § 3331. If you legally reside in a state but are not a citizen or national of the United States, you may serve in AmeriCorps VISTA without taking or subscribing to the oath, if AmeriCorps determines that your service will further the interest of the United States. In such a case, you will be required to take an alternative oath or affirmation.

## **CIVIL RIGHTS AND NON-DISCRIMINATION**

### **GOVERNING FEDERAL LAWS AND ORDERS**

As a member, a number of federal laws protect your civil rights. These laws prohibit discrimination in programs and activities where you serve—that is, programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance from AmeriCorps. The laws prohibit:

- Discrimination based on race, color, or national origin (Title VI of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 [42 U.S.C. §§ 2000d et seq.]
- Discrimination based on sex (Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 [20 U.S.C. §§ 1681 et seq.]
- Discrimination based on disability (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 [29 U.S.C. §§ 791 et seq.]
- Age Discrimination (Age Discrimination Act of 1975 [42 U.S.C. §§ 6101 et seq.]
- Discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, religion, or political affiliation (Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 [42 U.S.C. § 5057])

Presidential Executive Order 13160 (June 23, 2000) also prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, sex, color, national origin, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation, and parental status in federally conducted education and training programs, such as training conducted by AmeriCorps.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, mentioned above, requires sponsoring organizations to make their programs and facilities accessible to persons with disabilities, be they members, beneficiaries, employees, or the general public. Accessibility includes the physical accessibility of buildings (including buildings where public meetings are held), public information dissemination (for the sight, hearing, or mentally impaired), and workplace accessibility. This law also requires sponsoring organizations to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified members, beneficiaries, employees, or members of the public. AmeriCorps regulations that deal with section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 are contained in 45 CFR Part 1232.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), mentioned above, also requires sponsoring organizations to eliminate, to the maximum extent possible, English proficiency as an artificial barrier to full and meaningful participation by beneficiaries, AmeriCorps VISTA members, and members of the public in federally assisted programs.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX), also mentioned above, requires sponsoring organizations to eliminate (with certain exceptions) sex discrimination in their education programs and activities, regardless of whether a sponsoring organization is itself an educational institution.

In addition, as set forth in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (DVSA), mentioned above, for a sponsoring organization to be extended federal financial assistance, it must make and comply with all non-discrimination assurances in the grant, contract, or agreement authorizing the federal financial assistance. The sponsoring organization must specifically assure that no person with responsibilities for the operation of the organization will discriminate with respect to the program because of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, or political affiliation. AmeriCorps monitors continued compliance with these assurances.

### **Title VI Filing**

Any applicant, trainee, or member, or other program beneficiary, who believes he/she has been discriminated against, based on race, color, or national origin in the services provided by an sponsoring organization may file a discrimination complaint with AmeriCorps under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI) procedures. Title VI also prohibits AmeriCorps VISTA program beneficiaries, based on race, color, or national origin, from being excluded by sponsoring organizations from participation in an AmeriCorps VISTA program. Under Title VI, program beneficiaries are also prohibited from being denied the benefits, from sponsoring

organizations, of AmeriCorps VISTA programs because of race, color, or national origin. Finally, under Title VI program beneficiaries are prohibited from being subjected to discrimination by sponsoring organizations because of race, color, or national origin. (42 U.S.C. §2000d)



Therefore, any applicant, trainee, or member, or other program beneficiary, who believes he/she has been subjected to discrimination by a sponsoring organization, in violation of Title VI, may file a written complaint with AmeriCorps' Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) or AmeriCorps' Chief Executive Officer using the procedures set forth in 45 CFR 1225, Subpart B, "Nondiscrimination in federally

assisted programs-effectuation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964."

### **Title IX Filing**

Title IX prohibits AmeriCorps VISTA program beneficiaries from being denied the benefits of, or being subject to discrimination under, any education program or activity operated by a sponsoring organization because of their sex (20 U.S.C. §§ 1681 et seq.) Any applicant, trainee, or member, or other program beneficiary, who believes he/she has been discriminated against, because of sex, in any education program or activity provided by a sponsoring organization may file a discrimination complaint with AmeriCorps by filing a written complaint with AmeriCorps' Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) or the Chief Executive Officer of AmeriCorps using the procedures set forth in 45 CFR Part 1225, Subpart B, "Nondiscrimination in federally assisted programs effectuation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964." The same procedures used for filing a complaint under Title VI (see above) are used for filing a complaint under Title IX.

### **DVSA Filing**

The Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (DVSA) prohibits discrimination in the recruitment, selection, placement, service, or termination of any applicant, trainee, member, or other program beneficiary, because of race, color, national origin, religion, age, sex, disability, or political affiliation. If you believe you have been subject to any such discrimination, you may file a discrimination complaint with AmeriCorps. Any such person may use the discrimination complaint procedures set forth in 45 CFR Part 1225, Subpart B.

## **PROHIBITION AGAINST HARASSMENT**

As discussed above, the federal laws governing members strictly prohibit harassment in sponsoring organization programs and activities. Harassment may be a form of legally prohibited discrimination; regardless, it is always unacceptable.

AmeriCorps is committed to the notion that all persons serving in the AmeriCorps VISTA program be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of non-merit factors such as race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, political affiliation, marital or parental status, or military service. To that end, AmeriCorps is committed to sponsoring organization environments and service sites being free of sexual, racial, ethnic, religious, or other harassment.

Slurs and other verbal or physical conduct relating to an individual's sex, race, ethnicity, religion, or any other non-merit basis constitute harassment when it has the purpose or effect of interfering with service performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive service environment. Harassment includes, but is not limited to:

- Explicit or implicit demands for sexual favors
- Pressure for dates; deliberate touching, leaning over, or cornering; offensive teasing, jokes, remarks, or questions
- Letters, phone calls, or distribution or display of offensive materials
- Offensive looks or gestures; gender, racial, ethnic, or religious baiting; physical assaults or other threatening behavior
- Demeaning, debasing, and abusive comments or actions that intimidate; the comments or actions must be unwelcome

Harassment may be by persons of the same or different races, sexes, religions, or ethnic origins. It may be carried out by another service member, a sponsoring organization staff member, a project or site employee or supervisor, or another program beneficiary such as a client. Conduct directed at one member may create an offensive environment for other members.

It is also unlawful for a sponsoring organization to retaliate against a member who complains of harassment, regardless of whether or not the sponsoring organization believes the underlying complaint is valid. It is also unlawful for a sponsoring organization to retaliate against a member who testifies or participates in any way in a harassment investigation, proceeding, or litigation.

When investigating allegations of sexual and other illegal harassment, the whole record is reviewed. The circumstances, such as the nature of the comments or actions, and the context in which the alleged incidents occurred are considered and a determination on the allegations is made from the facts on a case-by-case basis.

It is helpful for a victim of harassment to inform the harasser directly and immediately that the conduct is unwelcome and must stop. If the victim is a member, the member should use any appropriate complaint mechanism or grievance system available, as discussed above and below.

## **DISCRIMINATION COMPLAINT PROCEDURES**

It is advisable for a member who believes he/she may be a victim of discrimination or harassment as described above to first bring it to the attention of his/her sponsoring organization. If, because of the circumstances, it is not possible to do so, the member should contact the AmeriCorps Field Office or the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) at AmeriCorps Headquarters in Washington, DC. Claims not brought to the attention of EOP within 45 days of their occurrence may not be accepted in a formal complaint of discrimination. No one can be required to use a program, project, or sponsor dispute resolution procedure before contacting EOP, and if another procedure is used, it does not affect the 45-day time limit. EOP may be reached at 202-606-7503 (voice), 301-577-7134 (TTY), or [eo@cns.gov](mailto:eo@cns.gov).

## **LIMITATION ON MEMBER ACTIVITIES AND DUTIES**

### **AMERICORPS GUIDELINES ON SERVICE OF MEMBERS IN RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS OR ACTIVITIES**

AmeriCorps acknowledges that religious activities play a positive role in healthy communities, that religion is a defining characteristic of many community organizations (faith-based and secular), and that religious-based belief and action are central to many members' lives.

It is important, however, that programs and their members do not endorse or promote, or appear to endorse or promote, religion or a specific religious belief. Consequently, we impose a number of limitations on activities that programs can support and in which members can engage while serving, or when otherwise representing, AmeriCorps VISTA. Members are free to pursue these activities on their own initiative on non- AmeriCorps VISTA time, and using non-AmeriCorps VISTA funds

or resources. The AmeriCorps logo should not be worn while doing so. These limitations are:

- Members may not give religious instruction, conduct worship services, or engage in any other religious activity as part of their duties or would be perceived as part of their duties by members of the community in which they serve.
- No religious instruction, worship, proselytizing, or other religious activity may be conducted as part of a project to which members are assigned or referred. Textbooks and other materials used in connection with the project should not have religious or sectarian content.
- Members who serve in an institution that gives religious instruction or engages in other religious activities may not be used as replacements for regular personnel of the institution. For example, members assigned to serve in a program conducted under the auspices of a church-related school may not be used as substitutes for regular teachers in the school. They may work on new programs, however, that are carried on in addition to the school's regular programs and that are conducted in conformance with these rules.
- The opportunity to receive the benefits of any project in which members serve will be open to persons in need without regard to their religious affiliation. Admission to programs supported by AmeriCorps VISTA shall not be based directly or indirectly on religious affiliation or on attendance at a church, church-related school, or other church-related institution or organization. The availability of the project's benefits to all needy persons in the area served will be publicized.
- Participation in an AmeriCorps VISTA project, by members or recipients, shall not be used as a means to induce participation in sectarian or religious activities.

## **LIMITATION ON POLITICAL ACTIVITIES**

Members, as well as projects, are subject to certain restrictions related to their engagement in political activities. Such political activities are classified as either: (1) engaging in electoral activities; (2) engaging in lobbying; or (3) participating in demonstrations.

### **Engaging in Electoral Activities**

Members may participate in electoral activities to the extent the activities are allowed under a federal law called the Hatch Act, 5 U.S.C. Chapter 73. The Hatch Act defines

the rules and restrictions on political activities in which federal workers may engage. The Domestic Volunteer Service Act, at 42 U.S.C. § 5055, applies the Hatch Act to AmeriCorps members in VISTA during their service.

The Hatch Act applies to all members, whether they serve full-time or part-time, at all times during their service, including off duty hours. Permissible activities under the Hatch Act, unless prohibited by other statutory authority, apply to members when they are on authorized leave or are not perceived to be performing as a member (e.g., while not actually, or perceived as, performing service, or off duty service time).

Under the Hatch Act, during off duty service time, members may engage in certain political activities, as follows:

- **May** be candidates for public office in nonpartisan elections
- **May** register and vote as they choose
- **May** assist in voter registration drives
- **May** express opinions about candidates and issues
- **May** contribute money to political organizations
- **May** attend political fundraising functions
- **May** attend and be active at political rallies and meetings
- **May** join and be an active member of a political party or club
- **May** sign nominating petitions
- **May** campaign for or against referendum questions, constitutional amendments, municipal ordinances
- **May** campaign for or against candidates in partisan elections
- **May** make campaign speeches for candidates in partisan elections
- **May** distribute campaign literature in partisan elections
- **May** hold office in political clubs or parties, including serving as a delegate to a convention

Under the Hatch Act, members are prohibited from engaging in the following activities at all times during service, including off duty service time:

- **May not** use their official authority or influence, as a member, to influence an election
- **May not** knowingly solicit or discourage the political activity of any individual or organization that has business before AmeriCorps or the VISTA program (e.g.a sponsoring organization or project)
- **May not** engage in political activity while in service time as a member (e.g., while on duty as a member at a sponsoring organization or project)
- **May not** engage in political activity while in any office of the AmeriCorps VISTA program (e.g., while at the sponsoring organization or the project)

- **May not** engage in political activity while using a vehicle owned or leased by the sponsoring organization or project
- **May not** be a candidate for public office in a partisan election
- **May not** wear political buttons while in service time as a member (e.g., while on duty as a member at a sponsoring organization or project)
- **May not** engage in political activity while wearing an article of clothing, badge, insignia, or other item that identifies AmeriCorps or the AmeriCorps VISTA program

Also, members generally may not solicit, accept, or receive political contributions, with one rare exception: A member may solicit a political contribution from another individual if the request is for a contribution to the multicandidate political committee of a federal labor organization or a federal employee organization, to which both the member and the individual belong. Such a solicitation is still prohibited, however, if the member who solicits is a leader and the individual solicited is a member.

Sponsoring organizations and projects may not use funds or personnel in a manner that supports or identifies the AmeriCorps VISTA program with partisan or nonpartisan election activities. Sponsoring organizations and projects also may not use funds or personnel in a manner that supports or results in voter registration activities, or that provides transportation to the polls. Additionally, no member or employee of a sponsoring organization may take any action with respect to a partisan or nonpartisan political activity that would result in the identification or apparent identification of the AmeriCorps VISTA program with such activity. The Hatch Act also prohibits members from engaging in voter registration activities or providing transportation to the polls during service hours.

### **Engaging in Lobbying**

Under federal law, sponsoring organizations may not assign members to perform service or engage in activities related to influencing the passage or defeat of legislation, or of legislative proposals or initiatives. Also, members are generally prohibited from engaging in such lobbying activities; however, there are two rare exceptions to this prohibition on lobbying:

- A member may draft, review, testify, or make a representation on a legislative measure if the member is asked by a legislative body, a committee of a legislative body, or member of a legislative body.
- A member may draft, review, testify, or make a written representation to a legislative body regarding a legislative measure directly affecting the operation of an project or program to which the member is assigned, as long as:

1. The sponsoring organization notifies the AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager on a quarterly basis of all activity occurring pursuant to this exception; and
2. The legislative measure related to the funding of the project or program affects the existence or basic structure of the project or program.

### **Participating in Demonstrations**

As mentioned above, members may participate in political rallies and meetings (i.e., demonstrations) with certain limitations. They may participate in these types of activities only while on authorized leave, or while off-duty or not otherwise engaged in performing AmeriCorps VISTA service. Such activities cannot be related to projects of the sponsoring organizations where the member serves. Moreover, members may only participate in such activities to the extent that: (1) the member does not represent or attempt to represent the views of members on any public issue; (2) the member's participation could not be reasonably understood by the community as being identified with the AmeriCorps VISTA program, the project, or other elements of his or her service; and (3) the member's participation does not interfere with the performance of his or her duties.

No sponsoring organization may approve a member's involvement in planning, initiating, participating in, or otherwise aiding or assisting in any demonstration.

A member must contact the AmeriCorps Field Office and get its permission, before he/she engages in any of the activities—electoral, lobbying, or demonstration—discussed above.

### **Social Media Use and Prohibited Political Activities**

Generally, as part of your official duties, members and sponsor/grant-funded staff may design, launch, and operate social media sites on behalf of the sponsor organization. Moreover, they may communicate about official program and project-related activities associated with the project. However, members and sponsor/grant-funded staff are strictly prohibited from engaging in the following types of communications on social media as part of their service or grant-funded activity:

- **Lobbying Activities** – attempting to influence the passage or defeat of legislation or proposals by initiative petition;
- **Electoral Political Activities** – engaging in partisan political activities, or other activities designed to influence the outcome of an election to a public office;

- **Other Political Activities** – participating in, or endorsing, events or activities that are likely to include advocacy for or against political parties, political platforms, political candidates, proposed legislation, or elected officials;
- **Organizing Activities** – assisting, promoting, or deterring union organization, or organizing or engaging in protests, petitions, boycotts, or strikes; and
- **Voter Registration Activities** – conducting a voter registration drive or discussing options regarding transportation to the polls.

### **LIMITATION ON DISPLACEMENT OF EMPLOYED WORKERS AND IMPAIRMENT OF CONTRACTS FOR SERVICE**

Members are prohibited from performing activities or duties that would otherwise be carried out by employed workers, or would supplant the hiring of, or result in the displacement of, employed workers, or would impair existing contracts for service (45 U.S.C. § 5044).

AmeriCorps regulations on non-displacement of employed workers and non-impairment of contracts for service are contained in 45 CFR Part 2556.150.

### **LIMITATION ON RECEIVING ANY COMPENSATION OR OTHER BENEFITS FOR SERVICE OF MEMBERS**

Agencies or organizations to which members are assigned, or which operate or supervise a project, are prohibited from requesting or receiving any compensation from members, or from those who benefit from the services that members provide (42 U.S.C. § 5044). In addition, it is the policy of AmeriCorps VISTA that members not accept any benefit from the sponsoring organization or the community served through their AmeriCorps VISTA assignments, unless otherwise permitted by AmeriCorps policy (such as housing, transportation, bus passes, and training materials and tools). Members are expected to serve the community, not themselves.

Cash or in-kind contributions to a project, provided under the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding between the primary sponsoring organization and another participating agency, is not considered compensation for member services. AmeriCorps must, however, review and concur in all such Memoranda of Understanding prior to implementation.

## **LIMITATION ON LABOR OR ANTI-LABOR ACTIVITY**

AmeriCorps funds must not be used, directly or indirectly, to finance labor or anti-labor organizations or related activities (42 U.S.C. § 5044). Consequently, a member must not be assigned to activities or duties that assist, directly or indirectly, any labor or anti-labor organizing activity or related activity.

## **PROHIBITION ON NEPOTISM**

To avoid actual or apparent favoritism in the operation of a project, the AmeriCorps VISTA program prohibits certain placement and assignment arrangements, as follows.

### **Members**

A sponsoring organization may operate a project out of a single project site, or multiple sites. When a “project site” is referenced, the prohibited arrangement is limited to that particular site, rather than a project as a whole. A member cannot be placed or assigned to a project site if the member is:

- in the immediate family (e.g., spouse, domestic partner, parent or guardian whether by blood or adoption, child whether by blood or adoption) of a staff member involved in the management or operation of the project or project Site, or of a AmeriCorps staff member in the applicable Field Office who makes decisions or takes actions regarding the project or the Site;
- a close relative, whether by blood or adoption, (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin), of a staff member involved in the management or operation of the project or project Site, or of a AmeriCorps staff member in the applicable Field Office who makes decisions or takes actions regarding the project or the Site;
- in the immediate family (e.g., spouse, domestic partner, parent or guardian whether by blood or adoption, child whether by blood or adoption) of a member of the board of directors of the specific project or project site where the member is assigned or reports for service;
- a close relative, whether by blood or adoption, (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin), of a member of the board of directors of the specific project or project site where the member is assigned or reports for service.

## **VISTA Project Supervisory Employees**

A project site employee is prohibited from holding a project supervisory position, if she/he is:

- in the immediate family (e.g., spouse, domestic partner, parent or guardian whether by blood or adoption, child whether by blood or adoption) of any AmeriCorps official responsible for the management and/or oversight of the project.
- a close relative, whether by blood or adoption, (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin), of any AmeriCorps official responsible for the management and/or oversight of the project.
- in the immediate family (e.g., spouse, domestic partner, parent or guardian whether by blood or adoption, child whether by blood or adoption) of any project and/or Site employee who holds supervisory authority over him/her; or
- a close relative, whether by blood or adoption, (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin), of any project and/or site employee who holds supervisory authority over him/her.

## **LIMITATION ON AMERICORPS VISTA FRATERNIZATION**

Relationships between members and staff members (including volunteer and contracted personnel) of AmeriCorps, sponsoring organization, and project site that are exploitive or that have the appearance of partiality, preferential treatment, or the improper use of position for personal gain, are prejudicial to the morale of members and will not be tolerated.

Inappropriate relationships between members and the aforementioned staff members are prohibited. Inappropriate relationships are those that compromise, or appear to compromise, supervisory authority or could result in preferential treatment. Relationships are prohibited if they appear to involve the improper use of rank or position for personal gain.

You must avoid nonprofessional relationships with other members or staff members that create real or perceived conflicts of interest, discord, or distractions that interfere with other members' productivity, or potentially could result in charges of sexual

harassment. These problems are particularly high risk in situations in which one person has authority over another.

Nonprofessional relationships between members and the aforementioned staff include, but are not limited to:

- Intimate/sexual relationships
- Borrowing or lending money, automobiles, or other personal property
- Engaging in financial or business dealings, or acting as an agent or sponsor with any commercial services
- Allowing services to be performed (compensated or uncompensated) that have no reasonable connection with AmeriCorps VISTA activities
- Gambling for goods, services, or money
- Any activity and/or relationship that, in the judgment of the AmeriCorps Senior Portfolio Manager, may be reasonably perceived to undermine discipline, good order, and/or morale
- Socializing that might lead to the perception of a relationship or overtures to activities listed above

Inappropriate relations include, but are not limited to:

- Nonprofessional relationships between a leader and a member the leader guides. Such relationships are strictly prohibited. Violators may be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including removal
- Nonprofessional relationships between an AmeriCorps Field Office staff member assigned to monitor or oversee a project, and an AmeriCorps VISTA member or leader of that project
- Nonprofessional relationships between a supervisor and a member the supervisor oversees

## **PROTECTION OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE BENEFITS WHILE SERVING IN AMERICORPS VISTA**

Members who are eligible to receive assistance or services (i.e., benefits) under any governmental program (e.g., Temporary Aid to Needy Families [TANF], Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income) prior to enrollment as a member or who are receiving such assistance or services during service shall not be denied such benefits or given a decreased benefit because of the member's failure or refusal to register for, seek, or accept employment or training during the period of service. This protection of benefits, provided at 42 U.S.C. § 5044, applies to any governmental program, including federal, state, and local programs.

## **INCOME EXCLUSION OF AMERICORPS VISTA ALLOWANCES FROM BENEFIT CALCULATIONS UNDER GOVERNMENTAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS**

Payments received by members (including living allowances) shall not in any way reduce or eliminate the level of, or eligibility for, assistance or services that any member may be receiving or is eligible to receive under any federal, state, or local governmental assistance program. This statutory provision is designed to ensure that persons, and families of persons, receiving assistance or services under any federal, state, or local governmental program before entering service do not lose benefits, or have benefits reduced, as a result of their service.

For example, persons who were receiving public assistance benefits before entering service will not have their allowances considered in determining whether they are still eligible for benefits for their dependents. In addition, the Domestic Volunteer Service Act clearly states that the same treatment be given to any benefits for which members were eligible, although not actually receiving, prior to their service (42 U.S.C. § 5044). This provision does not apply to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps. (see below).

This provision also applies to persons who become eligible for assistance or services while serving as members (e.g., a member reaches the age of 65 while serving and becomes eligible for Social Security benefits). AmeriCorps VISTA income shall not be counted in determining eligibility for, or the level of, Social Security retirement benefits.

## **PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AND BENEFITS**

### **SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP), FORMERLY KNOWN AS FOOD STAMPS**

The Department of Agriculture administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps. Department of Agriculture regulations state that members who were receiving SNAP benefits before joining AmeriCorps VISTA will not have their benefit allotment reduced or eliminated as a result of their allowances. However, members not receiving SNAP benefits before joining AmeriCorps VISTA will have their allowances counted as income for purposes of determining their level of SNAP benefit eligibility. Members may be held responsible for SNAP overpayments. Carefully check your allotments to ensure that you are not given SNAP benefits for which you are not eligible. If you apply for SNAP after you become a member, you will have a decreased SNAP allotment.

Department of Agriculture Food Stamp Regulations pertaining to AmeriCorps VISTA income exclusion are contained in the 7 CFR § 273.9(c)(10)(iii).

### **WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN PROGRAM**

The Department of Agriculture also administers the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program. Department of Agriculture regulations on the WIC program that pertain to AmeriCorps VISTA income exclusion are contained in the 7 CFR § 246.7.

### **SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY PAYMENTS**

Under regulations and rulings issued by the U.S. Social Security Administration, neither payments made to, nor the activities performed by, members are to be considered in determining the member's continued eligibility for Social Security disability benefits. This policy means that persons receiving disability payments before joining AmeriCorps VISTA may continue to receive benefits during their service regardless of the level of allowances received or the nature of the duties performed.

In regulations dealing with Supplemental Security Income for the aged, blind, and disabled, payments to members are specifically excluded in determining the resources of an individual (20 CFR § 416.1236(a)(9)).

Social Security Administration instructions pertaining to Supplemental Security Income, as well as to the Federal Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance program, stipulate that none of the "substantial gainful activity" tests (e.g., earnings, comparability of work activity, or worth of work activity) is to be applied to AmeriCorps VISTA activity performed under the Domestic Volunteer Service Act (POMS DI 10505.025B2). Similar language is also contained in Social Security Ruling 84-24, Titles II and XVI: "Determination of Substantial Gainful Activity for Persons Working in Special Circumstances-Work Therapy Programs in Military Service-Work Activity in Certain Government-Sponsored Programs."

### **VETERANS BENEFITS**

Under regulations issued by the Department of Veterans Affairs in the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 38, sections 3.261 and 3.262, compensation or reimbursement received by members will be excluded from income in claims for compensation, pension, dependency, and indemnity compensation.

## **HOUSING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS**

In accordance with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Notice of Federally Mandated Exclusions from income, payments to members cannot be considered as income for the purpose of determining income eligibility for Section 8 housing programs and other federally subsidized housing.

## **WELFARE REFORM LAW**

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, Public Law 104-193 is a federal welfare reform law. This law affects, in a number of ways, members who are eligible for or receive welfare even though the income disregard provisions of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, discussed above, are in effect. Members receiving cash assistance from states should discuss any issues directly with their state (or county) agency worker to discuss whether their service will adversely affect their eligibility for cash assistance.

The welfare reform law prohibits states from using federal money to keep a family on welfare beyond a five-year cumulative lifetime limit. In each state, however, 20 percent of welfare recipients can be exempted.

The Domestic Volunteer Service Act does not affect a state's ability to impose time limits members who currently receive cash assistance. In many states, any cash assistance that members receive from the state while in AmeriCorps VISTA will be counted against the state's time limits.

Within the framework of the welfare reform law, states can impose unique requirements regarding registration for employment or training programs. The federal law allows for a two-year time limit on cash assistance payments before welfare recipients must be working or enrolled in job training or vocational education programs. States, however, can impose even shorter time limits than the two years allowed by federal law.

Members should contact their state (or county) agency welfare workers and inform them that persons who serve in AmeriCorps VISTA are not available for employment or job training programs. In some cases, welfare workers may determine that service satisfies the state's requirement for participation in an employment or training program. Welfare workers may determine that service is an exemption from any employment or training program.

When you are dealing with state or county officials, you should remember to identify yourself as an AmeriCorps member in VISTA serving under the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, because the income disregard provisions of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act do not apply to other AmeriCorps programs. Inform your AmeriCorps Field Office immediately if you are having difficulties explaining these provisions. Your AmeriCorps Field Office can supply you with a letter that explains the income disregard provisions, which can be given to your case worker. Depending on the situation, you may need to seek the assistance of a legal aid attorney to represent you if your payments will be decreased or denied. AmeriCorps is unable to pay for legal assistance, but staff will assist in providing documentation to assist your legal representative.

### **AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBERS CONSIDERED FEDERAL EMPLOYEES ONLY FOR LIMITED PURPOSES**

AmeriCorps members in VISTA are regarded as federal employees only for certain purposes under 42 U.S.C. § 5055, including the Hatch Act, the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (worker's compensation), the Federal Tort Claims Act, the IRS Code, and Title II of the Social Security Act. Members are not regarded as federal employees for purposes of unemployment compensation, and allowances received from AmeriCorps are not regarded as wages, except for income tax and Social Security purposes.

Moreover, AmeriCorps members are not employees of sponsoring organizations. Because members serve under the authority of federal statute, their limited employment relationship is with the federal government (discussed above), not the sponsoring organization, and is governed by federal law, not state law. The sponsoring organization is not authorized to make contributions to any state unemployment compensation fund on behalf of AmeriCorps VISTA members assigned to the organization.

### **LIABILITY COVERAGE (FEDERAL TORT CLAIMS ACT)**

Members are considered federal employees for the purpose of coverage under the Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA). The federal government assumes liability for any damage to property or injury to persons caused by a member that arises only out of his/her official duties and for which the member would be liable under local law. If any claim is made against a member with respect to an automobile accident or other damage allegedly caused during the course of the member's service activities, the member should immediately report such claim to the project supervisor or sponsoring

organization, who in turn will contact the AmeriCorps Field Office. Refer to [Chapter 7](#) for procedures to be followed in the event of an accident involving a member.

In cases of potential liability on the part of the member for damage to property or injury to persons, other than motor vehicle accidents, the sponsoring organization or supervisor must immediately inform the AmeriCorps Field Office, which after consultation with AmeriCorps' Office of General Counsel, will advise the sponsoring organization on what steps to take.

Members and sponsoring organizations are prohibited from making any statements to other parties to accidents concerning the ultimate liability of the government on a particular claim. Statements concerning responsibility for an accident should only be made to government investigating officers. AmeriCorps' Office of General Counsel or the Department of Justice, if appropriate, will make the final determination as to whether an accident occurred within the scope of the member's project-related activities and the extent of the federal government's liability.

Members and sponsoring organizations are expected to give full cooperation to AmeriCorps' Office of General Counsel in obtaining necessary evidence and materials, and to the Department of Justice or United States Attorney in the event any legal action is begun in connection with an accident.

During off-duty hours, or in any situation in which members are not engaged in project-related activities, members are as personally liable as any other citizen for any damage or injury they cause.

## **FEDERAL EMPLOYEES' COMPENSATION ACT**

Members are also considered employees for the purpose of coverage under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA), also known as the Federal Worker's Compensation Act.

Under section 415(b) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, (42 U.S.C. § 5055), members who are injured or suffer occupational disease in the course of their service may claim and be eligible to receive benefits to cover medical expenses under FECA. FECA is administered not by AmeriCorps, but rather by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Worker's Compensation Programs (OWCP). OWCP, not AmeriCorps, decides whether a member should be granted or denied a worker's compensation claim.

## **UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION**

Despite being employees for the limited purposes as noted above, members assigned to local sponsoring organizations are not eligible to receive unemployment compensation for their service. Members are not in an employment relationship with either the federal government or the project sponsoring organization for employment compensation purposes. They are, therefore, not covered by federal or state unemployment compensation during their periods of service, or because they served.

While they serve in the AmeriCorps VISTA program, some members may receive unemployment compensation earned during previous employment. That compensation is unrelated to their service and is limited to unemployment compensation previously owed to the member. Such compensation cannot be based on continued compensation during service. The authority to continue such unemployment compensation while in the AmeriCorps VISTA program remains with the state unemployment compensation official and not with AmeriCorps. Accepting unemployment compensation that has not been authorized by the governor, or his designee, may result in overpayments, which can be collected by the state.

## **CIVIL SERVICE BENEFITS**

Members enrolled for a period of service of at least one year are entitled to the following federal civil service benefits, see 42 U.S.C. § 5055 for additional information.

## **NON-COMPETITIVE ELIGIBILITY IN FEDERAL CIVIL SERVICE**

Members may be hired as a non-competitive eligible appointee after successfully completing at least one full year of service. A non-competitive eligibility appointment means that a federal agency may hire a former member by establishing that the individual meets the minimum qualifications for a job, including any written test requirement. If the former member meets the qualification standards, they do not have to compete with the general public to be hired.

AmeriCorps VISTA service, however, is not creditable toward the service requirements for career tenure or toward completion of a probationary period. The probationary period begins with the appointment to federal civil service.

Non-competitive hiring privileges extend for one year after completion of service, except that the employing agency may extend the period for an additional two years for a former member who enters military service, studies at a recognized institution of

higher learning, or engages in activities that, in the view of the appointing authority, warrant an extension of the one-year limit.

As a former member, you are not guaranteed a federal civil service job.

Civil service openings are limited; obtaining employment will depend on such factors as your ability to locate an agency with a vacancy, your qualifications and suitability for the position, and the agency's interest in hiring you. You must comply with the position announcement instructions and provide the requested applicant information. Information on available federal positions may be obtained from Federal Job Information Centers across the country. These centers are listed in metropolitan area phone directories under "U.S. Government." You can also find federal positions listed at: <http://www.usajobs.gov/>.

To establish non-competitive status, you will need proof of eligibility for job consideration under the special hiring procedures described. You may print a letter that states your non-competitive eligibility from [my.americorps.gov](http://my.americorps.gov) after you successfully complete your year of service.

## **FEDERAL CIVIL SERVICE CREDIT**

One of the benefits you receive as a member hired into the federal civil service is that your time as a member will be credited toward a pension in the Federal Employees Retirement System, provided you pay a portion of your retirement contribution to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. The payment is based upon a statutorily mandated percentage of the stipend payment. The education award, like the stipend, is considered a form of payment. Therefore, members who elect the education award also will be required to make the same percentage cash payment to their retirement account as if they had actually received the stipend.

The service credit deposit payment should be made within two years of the individual becoming a federal employee. If the payment is delayed for a period greater than two years, interest will be payable. Alumni who become federal employees must contact the Human Resources/Benefits personnel at their current federal agency to initiate the deposit process.

AmeriCorps VISTA service may be credited in connection with subsequent federal employment in the same manner as a like period of regular civilian employment by the federal government. Service will apply toward purposes of determining seniority, reduction in force and layoff rights, leave entitlement, and other rights and privileges based on length of service under laws administered by the U.S. Office of Personnel

Management and other laws establishing terms and conditions of service of federal civilian employees.

Service, however, is not credited toward completion of any probationary or trial period, or completion of any service requirement for a career appointment.

## **LEGAL SUPPORT AND REQUEST FOR INFORMATION**

### **LEGAL EXPENSES**

AmeriCorps has the discretion to pay expenses incurred in the legal defense of members in judicial and administrative proceedings that relate to service. These expenses include counsel fees, court costs, bail, and other incidental costs. There is, however, no provision for the payment of attorney fees when members are involved in disputes addressing the denial or decrease of government benefits (see, for example, income disregard disputes under 42 U.S.C. § 5044), termination (45 CFR Part 2556 Subpart E), or grievance (45 CFR Part 2556.360) procedures. AmeriCorps' regulations on payment of member legal expenses are in 45 CFR Part 2556 Subpart D.

### **THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT (FOIA) AND THE PRIVACY ACT**

The Freedom of Information Act (5 U.S.C. § 552) gives citizens the right, with certain basic exceptions, to inspect federal records or have access to information maintained by the federal government. AmeriCorps regulations on implementation of the Freedom of Information Act are contained in 45 CFR Part 2507.

The Privacy Act (5 U.S.C. § 552a) gives citizens a proprietary right to their records and to control access to information maintained about them, with a few exceptions, by the federal government. This right applies to systems of records that contain personal data and where an individual record can be located by name or an assigned personal identifier. AmeriCorps regulations on implementation of the Privacy Act are contained in 45 CFR Part 2508.

Members may access information regarding the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act through the AmeriCorps website at: [www.americorps.gov](http://www.americorps.gov).